ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: "ON ONE FIX'D POINT": THE EVOLUTION OF PHILIP FRENEAU'S RATIONAL PHILOSOPHY

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Although most critics who have examined Philip Freneau's work have contended that the poet's philosophic enquiries were scattered and therefore not worthy of critical attention, this dissertation asserts that Freneau's search for an ordered universe that included the presence of a supreme being and the immortality of the soul was in fact more structured than has been previously thought. It focuses on the disappointing results of Freneau's application of Scottish Common Sense realism to the physical world and the rational presuppositions he initially formulated in previously unstudied prose essays that would ultimately lead to the deistic tenets he embraced after 1800.

Though much of his early poetry bears a strong resemblance to the work of English pre-romantics such as Cowper, Collins, and Thomson, Freneau's Common Sense

empiricism undercuts both the pastoral romanticism and Berkeleyan idealism of these works with realistic images of natural decay and violence, thereby displacing romantic tendencies with empirical observation.

But Freneau's hard-nosed realism proves disappointing during the 1780's, for his Common Sense approach, which posited that humans have direct contact with objective reality, finds no evidence of the existence of a deity, little hope of human immortality, and a natural world that both nurtures and destroys indiscriminately. The contradictions of renewal and decay in nature become so great that the poet questions humanity's ability to perceive and understand the physical world.

But out of his pessimism Freneau constructs a rational solution that accounts for nature's contradictions and the limits of human perception. In a group of four "Philosopher of the Forest" essays appearing in the 1788 Miscellaneous Works, Freneau determines that discord in nature is part of a divine plan beyond human understanding that has been conceived and set into motion by a remote deity who is also beyond comprehension. From this seed Freneau builds over the next thirty years a rational vision of a universe that, while too complex for humanity's limited intellect, nonetheless provides the materials by which humans, through the active application of reason and science, can begin to comprehend nature's discord as part of a larger design that is necessarily perfect.

"ON ONE FIX'D POINT": THE EVOLUTION OF PHILIP FRENEAU'S RATIONAL PHILOSOPHY

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Philip Freneau's literary career began with the pastoral romanticism of "The American Village" yet ended with numerous didactic poems, such as "On the Uniformity and Perfection of Nature," espousing a rational vision of the universe. In fact, the reader unfamiliar with Freneau would be unlikely to associate the two poems with the same poet, the former full of romantic imagery and the latter virtually empty of it. How Freneau's brand of rationalism evolved has been the subject of study by a number of his critics, perhaps because of the frequent philosophic turns Freneau took during his career. The romantic veneer of his poetry before 1780 was from the beginning undermined by questions and doubts concerning the benevolence of man and nature. Yet the empirical observation that generated these doubts proved to be equally illusive, for that same empiricism uncovered contradictions about the physical world that dominate Freneau's work in the early and mid 1780's, resulting in a stoical resignation to human transience in a seemingly violent and random universe. But stoic acceptance proved untenable for Freneau; at the close of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth, his lyric poetry proposes rational explanations to the chaotic phenomena he has observed. It is thus understandable why many of Freneau's critics have branded his philosophic

thought as scattered or inconsistent, reflecting attitudes of the moment rather than a coherent system.

Fred Lewis Pattee's biographical and critical introduction to Freneau in his three-volume Poems of Philip Freneau establishes an attitude toward the poet's philosophical depth and direction that has since dominated critical opinion. He views Freneau as a "young dreamer [who] was gradually disillusioned" because he was overshadowed by the period in which he lived (Pattee ciii). This disillusionment is reflected in the poet's canon, says Pattee, who sees the 1786 and 1788 collections as Freneau's most spontaneous and poetic before he became hardened by contact with everyday life and the practical world of politics. The changes Freneau made in subsequent editions seem to Pattee more pragmatic or political than poetic and thus reduce his early work to mere fragments that voice his deistic ideas or republican attitudes. By finally painting Freneau as a "practical" writer, Pattee dismisses him as a philosophic or theological thinker, contending he was "out of step with the theology of his generation ...out of tune with the music of his day," though he grants that Freneau perhaps was "beating time a half a century ahead of the chorus about him" (p. cxi).

Harry Hayden Clark's perspective on Freneau's philosophic ideas is far more sound. In his numerous studies on Freneau, Professor Clark prefers to focus on the

poet's deistic slant and the strong element of primitivism appearing in both the poetry and prose. He finds Freneau's philosophy to be based on a combination of "nature and humanity" (Clark, Poems xxxv), much of it influenced by Thomas Paine's assertion that nature should be considered the revelation of God. Clark, in fact, goes out of his way to tie Freneau to Paine, maintaining that both saw the universe as a "vast machine" that is fixed by beneficent but immutable laws, unlike the capricious world and fickle God of an Increase Mather. He contends that, because Freneau embraced the view of nature as revelation, the poet concluded that human progress was dependent upon science as a tool of discovery and a means of civilizing man. And because discovery and worship were centered in this world, Freneau saw human beings focusing more on their relationship with their fellow human beings and less on a relationship with a supreme being. Justice, mercy, and benevolence became not only moral but religious duties. For both Freneau and Paine, humanitarianism complemented the cosmic elements of deism (Clark, Poems xxxvii-xxxviii).

Clark also argues that this humanitarianism born of the study of nature is the foundation of Freneau's primitivism. He notes the poet's rejection of the discord of modern life and his belief, influenced by Rousseau, in the corrupting influence of civilization. As an additional influence, he cites the Lockean assumption that man is the

product of sensation and environment and that therefore the degree of evil in man was often a function of social institutions (Clark, Poems xli-xlii). Like Shaftesbury, Priestly, and Godwin, who took up this assumption to suggest how the evil of institutions inhibits man's good instincts, Freneau's faith in man's goodness led him to posit a democracy that had no need for kings or priests (Clark, Poems xlv).

Nonetheless, Clark, like others to follow, still sees Freneau as an artist filled with contradictions. Freneau celebrates fancy at the expense of reason in his early poetry, then does just the opposite at the end of his career. He revels in the beauty of nature in early poetry, such as "The Beauties of Santa Cruz," and celebrates its perfection in his later poems, but in between he often finds nature unpredictable and destructive (Clark, Poems lii). In a later study, Clark raises the same issue, describing Freneau as a humanitarian who could voice ferocious hatred, a humorous writer who could also be melancholy, and a poet of reason who could lament its reign ("Father of Poetry" 14-15). He even suggests an incongruence in Freneau's deistic thought, finding that because the poet's deification of cold, impersonal natural law left no place for a personal conception of immortality, Freneau became obsessed with the transience of the physical world (Clark, "Father of Poetry" 20). Clark concludes that Freneau could not focus with

concentrated intensity on significant experience and produce an ordered system of thought, despite the deistic foundation on which much of his late work rests:

> A good poem is like a pebble dropped into the still waters of the imagination, wakening ripples there that circle and spread until they lap along the shores of infinity; but instead of using a single pebble, skillfully directed, Freneau assaults the waters of the imagination with a handful of pebbles, and the ripples that are awakened quickly clash and the result is mere confusion ("Father of Poetry" 16).

Lewis Leary, author of That Rascal Freneau, considered the best biography of the poet, as well as of several subsequent studies, gives Freneau's philosophic thought even less credit than Clark does. Insisting that "too much must not be made of Freneau," he considers his subject to be a talented man who more often than not merely responded to the impulses of his time and borrowed whatever he found useful in content or form (Leary, Soundings 158). Thus Freneau's emphasis on transience and decay becomes little more than the extension of an eighteenth century convention, much like his early fondness for pastoral themes, for Leary takes great care to cite the influence of Pope, Addison, Milton, Goldsmith, and other English mentors on Freneau's work.

However, Leary does devote more time than any subsequent biographer to Freneau's aborted theological studies and their influence on his work. Though he notes the oft-cited tirade against theological study in Freneau's notebook ("Farewell to the study of Divinity--which is, in fact, the study of Nothing!"), he is also careful to explain that this rejection was more economic than spiritual and describes in detail Freneau's many entries that follow. Leary contends that these religious studies turned his obsession with physical transience into a belief in the vanity of worldly desire and contributed to the moral tone of works such as "Philosophic Reflections," "A Moral Thought," and the Pilgrim essays (That Rascal Freneau 99-103).

Unfortunately, Leary's reading of Freneau's work is largely cursory; he calls "The Beauties of Santa Cruz" a museum piece of baroque landscape rather than a poem and considers "The Invitation" to be only a call to men who would serve their country (That Rascal Freneau 70 and 96). Leary concludes that in his later poetry Freneau did not find a solution to the endless discord of nature and society but instead wearied of the struggle to understand the world as it was versus the world as it should be (That Rascal Freneau 339). If Leary regards Freneau's literary career as a failure, he is even more skeptical of the philosophic origins and resulting speculations of the poet's work:

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> ...[A]t best a probing into the philosophic basis of Freneau's writings is an unprofitable occupation. Sensuousness rather than rationality will be found to mark Freneau in all of his work. What garb of the latter he donned was of the cloth of his time, cut badly to fit a poet whose mind was at the mercy of his emotions (That Rascal Freneau 29).

Nelson Adkins did not take Leary's advice and produced eight years later the first full-dress examination of the philosophic influences on Freneau. In titling his book The Cosmic Enigma, Adkins exhibits an attitude similar to that of his predecessors, that Freneau lacked a coherent system of philosophic thought, yet reaches his conclusion only after a detailed examination of Freneau's work from four perspectives: Christianity, nature, Deism, and paganism. Adkins sees Christian influences in Freneau's work either feeding romantic impulses, particularly in "The House of Night," which sprang from his theological studies in the 1779 version but strayed from orthodoxy in the 1786 version, or surfacing out of a sense of pragmatism or "devotional propriety," as in a 1782 review of a religious text published in The Freeman's Journal, in which Freneau denies the reasonableness of eternal damnation but then admits that damnation restrains the wicked (14-17). The same type of tension appears in Freneau's theological notebooks; he sees

inspiration in the scriptures, yet he also seeks proof of God's existence in the symmetry and design of a Newtonian universe (Adkins 8-9).

Under the category of nature, Adkins cites numerous examples of eighteenth century natural philosophy in Freneau, particularly the glorification of simplicity and innocence in "The American Village" that echoes Goldsmith; the recurring image of the noble savage in "The Dying Indian," "The Indian Student," and the Tomo Cheeki essays; and a frequent endorsement of an agrarian society, again best exemplified in "The American Village" (20-25). But Adkins notes an opposing view appearing simultaneously. Freneau's enthusiasm for nature is tempered by an acknowledgement of its dark underside in the prose narrative accompanying the original publication of "The Beauties of Santa Cruz" and in the poem's ambivalent attitude toward pastoral romanticism (Adkins 27-28). His experiences as a sea captain and his resulting sea poems, many of which focus on the violence and seeming indifference of nature, undermine images of nurturing and well being. Adkins concludes that Freneau probably "saw nature's fits of anger as more numerous than her moments of moderation" and finally determined that common sense should moderate any romantic expansiveness he felt (32).

Freneau's deism, according to Adkins, is driven primarily by Newton's mechanical universe and the influence

of Thomas Paine's Age of Reason. Newton's appeal lay in his model of the universal machine, a well-ordered, mechanical whole held together by gravity. Deists became attracted to the Newtonian system because, as a machine, it provided empirical evidence of God's existence behind nature. But Freneau saw Newton's model as an argument for empirical observation and a rejection of revelation and religious orthodoxy, including Calvinistic divine intervention and the angry God of Puritanism (pp. 45-46). The malignant aspects of nature are explained as a "harmony not understood," a balanced system in which disorder moves toward order and divine perfection (p. 49). Adkins asserts that several of the new poems appearing in the 1809 and 1815 editions overtly reflect this point of view and that their philosophic tenets parallel many of Paine's conclusions in The Age of Reason, including acceptance of the universe as a perfectly contrived, harmonious whole, driven by immutable laws, and the notion that man should apply these same laws to the betterment of society (43-44).

Adkins' final section, titled "Paganism," is actually a discussion of Lucretian influences on Freneau and how they may have affected some of his deistic attitudes. Adkins believes that Freneau speculated on the possibility that no "First Cause," the force or supreme being that actually created and started the universe in motion, actually existed and that all creative power actually rested in nature (57-

58). Such speculation, he feels, may have been related to Freneau's classical training, especially his reading of Lucretius, who saw no design in the universe, only the whirling together and random collision of atoms. Lucretius' doctrine of transience or flux, which posits that all collocations of atoms must ultimately disintegrate and pass away, also attracted Freneau and found its way into works such as "The Deserted Farm House," "The Vanity of Existence," and "The Wild Honey Suckle." Adkins, however, sees a distinct difference in the way the two writers use the principle of flux. For Lucretius, it was a cosmic principle suggesting that new life would grow from decay; for Freneau, it was a cosmic predicament to which we must submit (Adkins 61-66).

The collocation and disintegration of atoms may have fueled Freneau's lifelong doubts about an afterlife, but Lucretius' rejection of immortality and of a first cause conflicted with Freneau's deistic view that humanity is gradually evolving towards the perfection of a supreme being. Adkins maintains that Freneau held to the notion of perfectibility, as evidenced by his assertion in "On the Powers of Human Understanding" that a decomposed or recombined mind survived the flux of existence and moved toward perfection (75).

Though he examines Freneau's works from four perspectives, Adkins concludes that the poet had no unified

system of philosophy and therefore does not attempt to trace any kind of philosophic development. He manages to make some connections, such as how Freneau's classical reading fed his skepticism and how his religious skepticism fed his deism, but he provides us with no answers concerning how Freneau arrived at his deistic point of view. Because he focuses almost exclusively on influences instead of readings of Freneau's major lyrics, his interpretation of Freneau's cosmic vision remains indeed enigmatic.

Almost thirty years passed before another critical work on Freneau appeared, but the conclusions Mary W. Bowden draws about Freneau's philosophic search in her 1976 study are essentially an extension of the attitudes of Clark, Leary, and Adkins. She finds no coherent system evolving from Freneau's canon and even doubts that the poet ever conducted any sort of meaningful search, stating that his body of work "lacks unity and a single focus" despite its complexity of thought (Bowden 171). She sees Freneau reacting to transience and discord with conventional eighteenth century attitudes: the seasons of life are compared to the seasons of nature and life's brevity is compared to that of a dream. Bowden in fact has so little confidence in the philosophic content of Freneau's work that she often refuses to examine it at all. She sees nothing more in "The Vernal Ague" than an attempt to imitate the traditional comparison of the seasons of life to the seasons

of man (37). She describes "The Jamaica Funeral" as a comment on the manners and attitudes of Caribbean society. "Captain Jones' Invitation," rather than questioning our epistemological ability to find self-knowledge, is simply a war poem. Even "Lines Written at Sea in a Heavy Gale" is considered to be nothing more than a description of a sea storm because it offers no "assurance" that the last three stanzas can be read on a metaphysical level.[1]

Like the preceding critics, Bowden sees Freneau's opinions varying somewhat arbitrarily according to the period of his life and the direction of contemporary events. She sees Freneau's attitude toward the nature of man's moral state varying over his career, contending he alternately saw man as good or evil (163). It is Freneau's inconsistency of thought and what she describes as the versification of almost every thought and speculation that leaves her hesitant to consider him seriously as a philosopher.

The common shortcoming of each of the preceding studies is the failure to provide a thorough reading of Freneau's lyrics and prose works. Many seek to describe the influences on his work, using the poems and prose to support arguments concerning influence, instead of using these influences to support contentions about the work itself. Two studies appearing in the late 1970's by J. Jeffrey Griffith and Richard C. Vitzthum provided the first detailed reading of Freneau's poems.

Griffith's unpublished dissertation at the University of Maryland focuses primarily on the poetry published during the 1780's, much of which illustrates, according to the author, a "crisis of belief" and an attempt by the poet to reorganize his world view (28). He finds Freneau rejecting pastoral romanticism in poems such as "The American Village," "The Beauties of Santa Cruz," and "The Dying Elm" because the inevitable decay and flux of existence preclude any possibility of harmony between man and nature.[2] Instead, Freneau begins to rely on an uncompromising empiricism during the 1780's that comes to question not only human knowledge of a spiritual world but also that of the physical world. What results is a growing disillusionment with humanity's perception of the world around it, expressed in such lyrics as "The Vernal Ague" and "The Departure," as Freneau questions phenomenological reality, the existence of a supreme being, and the survival of the human soul.

Griffith proposes that Freneau found his answer through the active application of his mind to the world around him. Passive perception of the physical world had proven to be illusive and emotionally debilitating. Rather than wither and die like the isolated flower in "The Wild Honey Suckle" in a passive state of retirement or resignation, Freneau recommended an active pursuit of knowledge with an equal application of both reason and imagination, despite the difficulty of the quest and the likelihood that absolute

knowledge is unobtainable. As examples of Freneau's revised vision, Griffith cites the active energy of Columbus in "The Pictures of Columbus," who uses both reason and imagination to seek proof of a new world (109-115), and the balance between reason and imagination in "The Indian Burying Ground" (155-62). It is also the active pursuit of the unknowable that is a cornerstone of the didactic poems of the 1809 and 1815 collections. In finding Freneau to be first and foremost concerned with the nature and perception of reality, Griffith provides strong evidence that Freneau's philosophic musings were far more structured than had been previously thought.

Like Griffith's book, Professor Vitzthum's Land and Sea, published in 1978, represents a departure from traditional thinking about Freneau's philosophic thought and development. Focusing on approximately one hundred lyrics, he proposes that Freneau developed a private symbolism based on polarities represented by the land and the sea. Images of the sea represent aggressive, dominating forces that manifest themselves in destruction, chaos, the threat of physical violence, and death. Images of land represent nurture and fecundity and appear as benevolence, passivity, and a harmonious vision of existence (Vitzthum 12-14).

Tracing this symbolism, Vitzthum finds a coherent evolution of Freneau's philosophic vision. The pastoral

idealism and pro-fancy bias that dominate the poetry before 1780 are replaced by a "harsh, skeptical empiricism" and a stoic indifference about life in the early and mid 1780's that results in an extreme reaction against his own romanticism (Vitzthum 47). This stoic indifference yields to a sense of resignation to and tolerance of the self-deception of romanticism that further detaches him from the natural world. But by the 1790's Vitzthum sees Freneau overcoming his detachment from nature, as the poet begins to see the contradictions between life and death, creativity and destruction, order and chaos as part of a greater unity requiring a certain level of discord for a higher purpose (126-27). The corresponding changes in Freneau's symbolism become evident; the image of the sea as destructive and chaotic is supplemented by a creative potency as life and death become complementary rather than antagonistic (Vitzthum 150). Finally, this sense of unity becomes more codified after 1800 in the "rational" poems, in which Freneau relies on internal reflection upon the revelation of empiricism to discover the harmony and perfection of nature and the uniform laws that reveal the perfection of the deity itself (Vitzthum 172-74).

Griffith and Vitzthum alter the direction of Freneau criticism by attempting to find some order in his philosophic searchings. Both find Freneau not merely dwelling on the transience of existence, as had been often

been suggested earlier, but seeking to discover the nature of reality. They agree that Freneau rejects the pastoral ideal as unworkable and finds empirical observation inadequate, if not deceptive. And both see the "rational" poems that appear at the close of the poet's career as an effort to explain the deceptions and disorder he experienced as part of a higher purpose. Together they present a Freneau who is far more reflective and who has a better grasp of philosophic issues than had been previously supposed.

Yet both studies fall short of examining Freneau's work from a formal philosophic point of view, even though both note several philosophical conclusions that can be drawn at specific points in Freneau's canon. Griffith's goal is first and foremost to provide an initial coherent reading of the poet's lyrics; Vitzthum's primary thesis is the development of Freneau's "private symbolism" around images of the land and the sea and the opposing, yet consistent, meanings that each class of imagery invokes. And while this symbolic polarity reflects a unified vision in Freneau's poems, there is, I believe, an equally significant influence that turns seemingly scattered philosophical musings into a well-ordered search for a theory of knowledge, a sense of cosmic design, and an identification of some type of supreme being or intelligence in this universe. That influence is the tradition of British empiricism.

That eighteenth-century poets, especially the British, were influenced by some level of empirical thought is hardly an original assertion. Many scholars have noted the impact empirical thought, especially Lockean theories of perception and the formation of simple and complex ideas, had on eighteenth-century British poetry. Critics and poets both believed that visual imagery was an important ingredient in poetry, an outgrowth of the relationship between the poetic and philosophic interest in the imagery of sight (Spacks 2). Ernest Tuveson notes how the visual and intellectual worlds of this period began to merge. Locke's description of the nature of the mind resulted in a poetry dominated by the visual; Lockean ideas became images, complex ideas became multiple pictures, and understanding itself became a form of perception (Tuveson 72-73). By the middle of the century verse relying on simple ideas that replicated nature was generally regarded as a poetry of reason while verse using more complex images, combining various parts of perceived nature into images that were not found in the natural world, was considered a poetry of fancy (Vitzthum 16).

But it was not the poetic technique that evolved from empiricism that was the most significant influence on Freneau, though we may see some examples of the complex images of "fancy" in his early work; what affected Freneau's philosophic thought was the evolution of epistemological theory in the work of the three great Empiricists, John

Locke, George Berkeley, and David Hume, and, more important, outside reaction to that evolution by the Scottish Common Sense school. Locke argued that all knowledge comes from the creation of ideas resulting from sense experience and reflection based on those sense experiences. But these ideas are separate from the external objects that stimulated sense experience, for we cannot know objective reality, whose existence Locke nevertheless affirmed. George Berkeley challenged this materialistic view, stating that our knowledge of anything comes only from our sensation of it and the ideas derived from those sensations. Therefore, an object is merely a "bundle of perceptions," in other words classified and interpreted sensations. All matter, from our perspective, is a mental condition, and the only reality we can know directly is the mind. But Hume took this denial of the material one step further, determining that the mind is known in the same manner that we know matter, through perception. He asserted that the mind is not a substance or an organ that has ideas but only an abstract name for perceptions, memories, and feelings that comprise the mind. And he went on to conclude that because an individual consists only of a series of mental activities, no observable soul exists behind the processes of thought.

Hume's skepticism found an immediate opponent in the Scottish Common Sense school, whose adherents found Hume's

conclusions an outrage to "common sense" thinking. The Common Sense philosophers accepted the Empiricist view that knowledge is acquired through sense experience, but they rejected Locke's contention that ideas in the mind were separated from the external objects that those ideas represented. Instead, they asserted that the individual knows real objects in the physical universe by direct perception, that sense impressions are not mere copies but contacts with objects that possess an existence of their own independent of our experience. Equally important, the Common Sense philosophers said that thoughtful men could apply reason and good sense to their perceptions to resolve moral and intellectual problems that confronted them (Elliott 30-31). It was this brand of empiricism that the Reverend John Witherspoon brought to Princeton as its new president the same year Philip Freneau entered the college.

Witherspoon taught in his lectures on moral philosophy that empirical proof could be found for each element of orthodox Christian doctrine, for he believed man possessed an innate moral sense that could be applied to experiences in the real world. He therefore challenged his students to examine theological and moral questions based on the evidence they discovered or possessed and draw their own conclusions. Immediate experience combined with this moral sense of right and wrong allowed man to comprehend the human

condition and effect improvement in both the spiritual and material status of this condition (Vitzthum 19-21).

Witherspoon's approach, despite its decidedly Christian purpose, may have extinguished any remaining religious enthusiasm fostered by Freneau's parents or his grammar school master William Tennent, as Vitzthum suggests (21), but the Princeton president's greater influence was his Common Sense epistemology. Its emphasis on the human ability to know objective reality is reflected in the realism that at first undermines the romanticism of Freneau's early poetry and then comes to dominate his later work. Philosophically, therefore, Freneau's "common sense" approach to the world, his evolving sense of hard-nosed realism, is the vehicle by which he explores a trio of issues throughout his writings.

First, Freneau used the realism of the Common Sense school as his approach to the world. In his work during the 1770's this realism challenges the supremacy of the imagination over reality and the appeal of pastoral romanticism and becomes dominant in the 1780's as he more and more relies on empirical observation. Yet his growing acceptance of a common sense materialism in the 1780's leads him to a sense of the profound contradictoriness of nature. Thus the foliage of a forest contains the seed of its own destruction; the beauty and calm of an ocean in an instant turn into violence and death. Freneau's initial reaction

appears to have been one of stoical acceptance, but merely accepting contradictions that make no sense proved to be untenable. It became clear to him that direct observation was not enough; sensory input was filtered through a human intellect that interpreted phenomena. Consequently his poetry after 1790 argues that what we perceive is only a partial revelation of a much broader reality which we cannot comprehend with our limited intellect, though we may enhance our perception through the exercise of reason and science.

The second issue Freneau examines is the question of design or purpose in the universe. When his earliest empirical observations revealed how difficult it was to understand the world, they suggested a universe in eternal flux, and his earliest poems adopt a Lucretian materialism in which the physical world is always capable of disintegrating into an atomic state that can then randomly reassemble in new forms. This potential for random dissolution and aggregation of matter is expressed in the poems of the 1780's in terms of creative and destructive aspects of nature. Yet toward the end of the decade, it is nature's destructiveness that predominates in such poems as "Lines Written at Port Royal" and "The Departure," both of which delineate the indifferent corrosiveness of nature as well as human malevolence. Freneau now finds no sense of purpose in the world he observes, only inexorable chaos. His escape from this chaotic vision is epistemological in

nature. Because human knowledge is limited, it sees only part of the divine plan; what in nature appears contradictory or destructive is actually part of a universal balance of creative and destructive forces. How much design or purpose we discover depends on our filtering the material world properly through our perceiving intellects.

The third part of Freneau's philosophic journey has to do with his effort to ascertain the existence of a supreme being and the possibilities of afterlife. For Freneau this was apparently the most daunting issue; he approaches the question of an afterlife tentatively in his first published work, "The American Village," introducing possibilities varying from the Christian heaven to annihilation in the tale of the death of two important Indian characters. Uncertainty turns to overwhelming doubt during much of the 1780's, when Freneau's materialism produces poems emphasizing the transience and decay of the material world and its random, life-threatening violence. For Freneau, physical nature itself offers no proof of either spiritual survival or a deity offering any kind of salvation.

Freneau again turns to a combination of perception and intellect to establish a concept of a supreme being. In his late eighteenth and early nineteenth century work, he adopts the deistic notion that although we can glimpse a deity in the workings of physical nature, we will never know the deity's attributes fully, for his role in our universe is

essentially remote.[3] He is the "first cause" or author of the physical universe, but, because he is perfect, his creation must be perfect and therefore require no divine intervention. Any contradictions that we observe are, once again, the result of our limited perception--that is, our inability to see the whole of God's plan. However, whatever contradictions or "imperfections" we observe can be mitigated through vigorously applied reason, which Freneau calls the "faint image"[4] of the all creating power of a "God of Reason." Such application may prepare man for a possible reunification of human reason with the reason of the Almighty Being.

In sum, Freneau determined that although the human capacity to perceive and comprehend the universe seemed too limited to discover a plan or divinity in nature, hard thought could bridge the gap. A purely empirical approach led him to philosophic chaos and the need to weld active reasoning onto passive empiricism to create a coherent and satisfying vision of the universe. This study will examine this literary and philosophic journey by means of detailed analysis of Freneau's poetry and prose.

I have broken down Freneau's canon into four periods that reflect distinct philosophical trends. The initial period, covering Freneau's work up to 1780, is marked by romantic themes, such as the supremacy of the imagination and the superiority of primitive life, that are nonetheless

challenged by the influence of empiricism. The second period, covering the years between the publication of "A Moral Thought" in 1781 and the appearance of the 1788 collection The Miscellaneous Works of Philip Freneau, is Freneau's darkest, during which his empirical approach to the world results in a poetry dominated by a skepticism bordering on nihilism. The third period, beginning with the publication of the 1788 text, including the significant "Pictures of Columbus," marks the turning point in Freneau's philosophical thought, for over the next decade both his poetry and prose begin to abandon passive, empirical observation in favor of the active application of reason. The final period, beginning just before the end of the 1790's but best represented by work appearing in the last two collections, Poems Written and Published During the American Revolutionary War, published in 1809, and A Collection of Poems on American Affairs, published in 1815, sets forth the tenets of Freneau's mature philosophy. A word on the editorial problems posed by Freneau's work is in order. Freneau republished many of his works throughout his career, often with revisions; most often a poem or essay appeared first in a newspaper or periodical before it was collected in one of the five books he published in his lifetime. In fact, once a work appeared in one of the five collections, it often reappeared in subsequent collections in revised form. Most of Freneau's revisions are cosmetic

and have little effect on themes or philosophic points of view, but a few poems, notably "The Beauties of Santa Cruz," "The House of Night," and "Lines Written at Port Royal," receive substantial revisions. Naturally, these poems will be considered in both their original and subsequent forms, but for the purposes of this study, the earliest published version of each work will be discussed as the most reliable presentation of Freneau's philosophic point of view at that time. For those poems that first appeared in newspapers and periodicals, I have turned to Judith Hiltner's The Newspaper Verse of Philip Freneau as the source text.

What proof there is of Freneau's philosophical development rests wholly on his published work, for there is no manuscript material extant, a fire having destroyed his Mt. Pleasant, New Jersey, home and its contents in 1818. Nonetheless, his published poetry and prose reveal a man with an abiding curiosity about the world and our ability to perceive and understand it. The conclusions he reached at the beginning of the nineteenth century stand in contrast to the growing romanticism in American literature. The rational solution that thoroughly dominates his last collection in 1815 appears just before the publication of Washington Irving's The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon in 1820 and James Fenimore Cooper's The Pioneers in 1823. Thus we may probably regard Philip Freneau as the last of the American rationalists, but his road to rationalism was one

seldom traveled and full of adventure, as the following chapters will attempt to show.

Endnotes

[1] See chapter 2, "Occasional Poetry," pp. 46-86. Most of this chapter deals with poetry written between 1776 and 1790, the most productive and intense period of his career. Though many of these poems represent the failure of both pastoral romanticism and empirical observation, Professor Bowden tends to focus on their reflection of eighteenth century conventions or the personal and public events of Freneau's life.

[2] See chapter two, "'Freedom of the Mind': The Early Poetry." Griffith assets that Freneau rejects pastoral romanticism in most of the pre-1780 poems because he cannot put aside the transience of physical existence.

[3] Thomas Paine takes a similar position in The Age of Reason, in which he asserts that "reason can discover [the existence of God], but it falls infinitely short in discovering the whole of [his attributes]."

[4] See "Reflections on the Power of Human Understanding."

CHAPTER 2: ROMANTIC IMAGES AND EMERGING SKEPTICISM

By the time of his graduation from Princeton in 1771, Freneau had already composed several poems, many of which would appear in his initial collection in 1786.[1] With the exception of "A Poem, on the Rising Glory of America," a graduation poem Freneau co-authored with Hugh Henry Brackenridge, most of these collegiate works focused on the brevity and transience of life and reflected the influence of eighteenth-century pre-Romantics such as Joseph Warton, William Collins, and Thomas Gray in both style and content. From this melancholy point of view, Freneau produced "The Poetical History of the Prophet Jonah," which tells the biblical story in what Leary calls "tattered shreds of eighteenth century didacticism" (That Rascal Freneau 25) and closes with Jehovah's warning the prophet to "Enjoy thy gifts while yet the seasons run" (Poems of Freneau 1-12, l. 346). "The Pyramids of Egypt" takes up similar themes of transience and decay, foretelling through the personified voice of Time the ultimate destruction of all things.

Freneau's collegiate work was dominated by the certainty of change, decay, and inevitable death, but these themes were probably an imitation of the popular poetry of the age rather than the first romantic ruminations of a young poet.[2] Many critics have nonetheless pointed to the domination of romantic themes as characteristic of Freneau's

poems throughout the 1770's, most notably in the poet's emphasis on pastoral idealism and primitivism, the superiority of the imagination, and the benevolent beauty of the natural world. Two poems from this period, "The Power of Fancy" and "The House of Night," reinforce this opinion, for they are Freneau's most significant reflections on the creative power of the imagination. Yet within several other poems that highlight these romantic attributes reside skeptical arguments, some subtle and some less than subtle, that challenge a romantic point of view. To images such as primitive Indian villages, rural colonial settlements, and Caribbean forests, Freneau brings an empirical perspective, injecting elements of realism which either undermine or even explode the romantic models he uses. Thus the first decade of Freneau's literary career is not so much a brief foray into romantic idealism as it is an inner conflict between the romantic attitudes of his poetic mentors and the empirical realism he had absorbed at Princeton.

I. The Delusion of the Pastoral Ideal

"The American Village," the title work of a small collection of four poems Freneau published in 1772, has been considered an example of the neo-classical lament over the passing of the pastoral ideal and a presentation of America as the successor to the Old World tradition of rural culture.[3] But a careful reading of the poem in the context

of empirical realism reveals that it is also a rejection of the pastoral model as a product of fancy. Freneau condemns the pastoral ideal through a series of comparisons woven into the structure of the poem. The controlling thread is a description of colonial American rural life, but placed in the middle of this description are two fantasies, a portrait of an ideal pastoral island located somewhere "between New Albion and the Mexic' Bay" (88) and a tragic tale of an Indian couple living on the Hudson Bay. Not only do these two fantasies stand in bold relief against the American scenes, they also provide sharp contrasts with each other in their depictions of the pastoral world.

The prominent characteristic of the opening descriptions of American rural life is their acknowledgement of the darker aspects of nature. The first eighty-six lines do indeed provide numerous illustrations of fertility and plenty cultivated by the healthy labors of country swains and of the resulting charity that ensures that "no needy wretch the rage of winter feels" (The American Village 1-22, l. 83). In addition, the inclusion of such conventional expressions as "hoary thickets" (25), "woodland nymphs" (27), and "Dryads fair" (29), further support the pastoral ideal. But in the midst of this bucolic world the speaker reminds us that neither humanity nor nature is as benevolent we might expect in a pastoral setting. He asks us to forget the recent French and Indian wars and then ironically

dismisses the natural hazards of the American wilderness by comparing them to the ferocity of humans:

> What tho' thy woods, AMERICA, contain
> The howling forest, and the tiger's den,
> The dangerous serpent, and the beast of prey,
> Men are more fierce, more terrible than they.
> No monster with its vile contagious breath,
> No flying scorpion darting instant death;
> No pois'nous adder, burning to enrage,
> Has half the venom or has half the rage. (31-39)

Even the civilization of such a raw land calls to mind the potential perils of nature:

> The soil which lay for many thousand years
> O'er run by woods, by thickets and by bears;
> Now reft of trees, admits the chearful light,
> And leaves long prospects to the piercing sight;
> Where once the lynx nocturnal sallies made
> And the tall chestnut cast a dreadful shade:
> No more the panther stalks his bloody rounds,
> Nor bird of night her hateful note resounds;
> Nor howling wolves roar to the rising moon.
>
> (57-65)

At line eighty-seven the poem suddenly breaks off its depiction of the American village and begins to describe the first fantasy pastoral, an island somewhere in the Atlantic Ocean, isolated from civilization. Unlike its

American counterpart, this scene exemplifies the pastoral ideal in its freedom from both the tumults of nature and the ferocity of humanity. It remains peaceful and unthreatened while withstanding the lashes of a furious ocean and lacks the discord of "shouting armies" (104), "clam'rous crews" (107), or "murd'rous ruffians" (108). Significantly, this island suffers from no human strife simply because, as the speaker points out, there are no humans. The civilization he describes is pure speculation about a place where "some village might have stood" (118), with a race every bit as ideal as the island on which it resides, supported by a benign and benevolent nature that provides sustenance with the help of the honest labor of the inhabitants.

In spite of its seeming perfection, however, this ideal is, for Freneau, a failure. The fact that these people constitute a village that "might have stood" indicates its remoteness from reality. In addition, this is a race without intellectual development: the people, "with happy ignorance divinely blest" (141), appear to have no interest in either the natural phenomena around them or their own mortality. What Freneau appears to be saying is that it is impossible even to contemplate a human society in an ideal world, for there can be no harmony between man and nature (Vitzthum 29 and Griffith 33). Ultimately, the island itself cannot survive in a transient universe, for it is

finally destroyed by "envious time" (155).

The second scene, which could be labeled an anti-pastoral, presents the story of the Indians Colma and Caffraro, who live in a world that is as harsh and barren as the ideal island is beautiful. Freneau describes their Hudson Bay environment as a "dreary region" (245) dominated by "thund'ring storms" and "deep laid snows" (247-48) where hunger is more common than plenty. To survive in this stark world, the Indians have taken up trading, thereby giving in to what the speaker calls the greatest threat to pastoral life, commerce, which he cites as the chief reason behind the fall of each great agrarian civilization. Colma's drowning in the bay as they sail to the British trading post can be seen as a consequence of the commercial invasion of the pastoral world, but, more important, it is also the final stroke in a portrait of a hostile natural world, one far more real than the imaginary island, that contradicts the pastoral ideal.

A concurrent issue raised during the tale of Colma and Caffraro is Colma's musings about afterlife just before she drowns. Her reflections on the survival of the soul are at first sanguine, for she sees a land of "lovely blossoms" (319) and "lofty mountains" (315). Yet her afterlife experience also seems insubstantial; she will "haunt the bow'r or lonely shade" (337) where her soul will wait for Caffraro. These rewards seem at best tenuous, and the

speaker provides no assurances, speculating that "perhaps in some strange fancy'd land" (373) they will reunite (Andrews 21). His closing remarks on the tale extend the uncertainty, for all he can do is list the possibilities following death, including a nihilistic "you will not be" (384). If Colma and Caffraro are destined for oblivion, the romantic hopefulness in the survival of the soul is lost.

The remaining lines of the poem return to the American village from which the speaker's pastoral musings began. Many critics have viewed the conclusion as a retreat from reality for the philosophic calm of rural life,[4] but these lines actually confirm Freneau's rejection of the romance of pastoralism. The speaker asserts that if he had not been overcome so quickly by the cares of everyday life, he "could have strayed/ To woods, to thickets or the mountain shade" (397-98) and become a romantic. But he now knows that every contemplation of the pastoral ideal is only a wish to escape to a world where, as in the his lost island, there exists "No thought ambitious, and no bold design" (407). The retreat into philosophic contemplation and devotion to poetry that the speaker muses over near the end may be a tempting pipe dream, but the final four lines leave little doubt that Freneau is leary of pictures made by fancy:

> Now cease, O muse, thy tender tale to chaunt,
> The smiling village, or the rural haunt;
> New scenes invite me, and no more I rove,

To tell of shepherds, or the vernal grove.

(436-39)

Annette Kolodny has stated that the problem in "The American Village" lies in Freneau's inability to choose between the poem's competing pastoral images, a conventional, cultivated landscape versus a primitive island paradise with limited agriculture (82). But the choice Freneau makes is not between pastoral images but between imagination and empirical perception. Every image of the ideal in the poem is undercut. The island paradise is so remote from reality that Freneau cannot place a civilization in it except as a speculative fantasy, while the American village, though steeped in the traditional imagery and language of the pastoral, is also a world filled with natural threats and random violence. And finally there is the bleak rural existence of Colma and Caffraro, the antithesis of the island paradise and a darker New World alternative to the somewhat more benign setting in America. Here the poet has chosen the empirical over the imaginative, for the paradise he has imagined sacrifices the reality of both the American and Hudson Bay landscapes and thereby renders the ideal insubstantial.

In a companion poem in the American Village collection, "The Farmer's Winter Evening," Freneau creates another dream world of pastoral romanticism, only here the dream is not merely speculative but potentially destructive. Unlike the

detached speaker of "The American Village" who examines and compares realistic and idealistic worlds, the speaker of "The Farmer's Winter Evening" seeks to become wholly a part of his ideal, for the opening lines indicate his willingness to forgo reality for a vision of pastoral contentment:

> Far be the pleasures of the day,
> And mirth and festive joy from me,
> When cold December nips the plains,
> Or frozen January reigns.
> Far be the hunts-man's noisy horn,
> And coursers fleet thro' thickets borne,
> Swift as the wind, and far the sight,
> Of snowy mountains, sadly white;
> But thou, O night, with sober charms,
> Shall clasp me in thy sable arms.
> For thee I love the winter's eve,
> The noisy day for thee I leave. (1-12)

The night obliterates the sights and sounds of reality and allows the speaker to fantasize about singing swains, "hoary headed sage[s]" (21), and, especially, faithful shepherdesses in an Arcadia of his imagination. But he wants to do more than merely fantasize about a rural life; he wants to live within that "fancy'd wood" (46) and be absorbed in his own pastoral ideal. He can do so, however, only through a drug-induced sleep:

Steep me, steep me some poppies deep
In beechen bowl, to bring on sleep;
. . . . . .
O gentle sleep, wrap me in dreams,
Of fields and woods, and running streams;
Of rivers wide, and castles rare,
And be my lovely FLORA there. (53-60)

But his dream is only a partial solution; a permanent solution is a "larger draught, a larger bowl" (61) that, in the words of his Flora, will let him "wake no more" (64). As the personified temptation to abandon reality, Flora offers the speaker the final romantic escape, destruction. But her offer is not so much a physical death as it is a metaphorical death of the empirical mind, trapped in a debilitating fantasy. The speaker, along with his temptress, will "quaff the water" (71) of Lethe to forget not only everyday cares but empirical reality, both losing their identities as the mythical Arethusa and Alpheus do in the mingling of their waters near the end of the poem. That the speaker should do this to avoid the charge that he had otherwise "sigh'd for one I've never seen" (74) is ironic, for in immersing himself in romantic folly he will exchange the empirical world for an imaginary "daughter/Of [his] giddy, wandering brain" (72-73).

The reference to the Greek legend of Arethusa and Alpheus reinforces the capitulation to romanticism that

permeates the end of the poem. Vitzthum finds a parallel between this myth and the drinking from Lethe by both Flora and the speaker, arguing that both point to death as the only way of obtaining a communion with nature (33). And it is this extreme resolution that confirms Freneau's position regarding imagination and empirical reality. Despite the speaker's willingness to abandon reality for an imaginative world, there is no permanence to his romantic ideal except in death. For Freneau, there is no more substance to this pastoral image than to the one in "The American Village." It is this rejection of the romantic image based on imagination combined with the realistic images undercutting the American pastoral in "The American Village" that indicate Freneau's preference for empirical sources of knowledge. But throughout the 1770's, as the young Freneau evolved as a poet, the question of empirical reality versus imagination was not so easily resolved.

II. The Ascendancy of the Imagination

Although "The Power of Fancy" did not appear until the publication of Freneau's first collection in 1786, the poet assigns the date 1770 just below the title, and several scholars have concluded that, even if the exact date of composition is uncertain, the content indicates that the poem does indeed belong to the period before 1780. They base their opinions on the poem's advocacy of the imagination, represented as inner impressions of qualities

as opposed to sense perceptions, as a legitimate source of knowledge and ideas, an argument Freneau's work does not embrace after 1780. Vitzthum, for example, describes the poem as a repudiation of Locke's theories of mechanical association and image-making (72) while Leary in That Rascal Freneau considers the poem's manifestations of reality as "ideas of the Almighty mind" reminiscent of Berkeleyan idealism (29). Leary is in fact correct, but he does not explore the association deeply enough, for "The Power of Fancy" delineates George Berkeley's theories of perception and human imagination.

In A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge, Berkeley held that objects must be perceived in order to exist, yet he was also aware that humans could not perceive all things at all times. He therefore accounted for the continued existence of things that are not being perceived by a human being by asserting that these objects must be in the mind of another active agent. That agent was God, whose perception of objects in this world makes them perceivable for humans. Freneau echoes this very notion in lines 11 through 20 of "The Power of Fancy":

> Ah! what is all this mighty WHOLE,
> These suns and stars that round us roll!
> What are they all, where'er they shine,
> But Fancies of the Power Divine!
> What is this globe, these lands, and seas,

And heat, and cold, and flowers, and trees,
And life, and death, and beast, and man,
And time--that with the sun began--
But thoughts on reason's scale combin'd,
Ideas of the Almighty Mind?

(Poems of Freneau 23-27)

But whereas God is the agent of our ideas of sense perceptions, humans themselves are the agents for ideas produced by the imagination, and it is this ability to produce clusters of coexisting qualities distinguishable from sense perceptions that is the subject of much of the rest of the poem. The speaker cites numerous images attributed to imagination, or "fancy," that cannot be empirically perceived, such as a picture of earth from space, described, as in Milton's Paradise Lost, as a "distant star" (33). He describes the "lonely dome" (35) of heaven filled with "lofty anthems...[that] "half distract the mind" (39-40), visits the "prison of fiends" (42) that is hell, and pictures an Arcadian world marked by "chrystal streams and coral beds" (50) These images are beyond the pale of empirical observation, as are the temporal and spatial shifts that occur in the verse. Fancy "like lightening...descends" (41) on Scandinavia, the Scottish islands, and the Caribbean and instantly recreates the classic worlds of Greece and Rome. Even death itself is no match for the power of imagination, through which the

speaker "glide[s]...Through shroud and coffin" (128) to behold the deceased Belinda. Though the violence of the world above can no longer awaken her, the speaker, now so confident of fancy that he finds it more powerful than death, asks almost casually, "Shall we break this prison deep?" (132)

The final passage celebrates the "endless images" (143) that imagination can create, numerous enough to fill a universe. As an artist he praises the power of imagination as the creator of worlds that otherwise could not exist:

> By thee Elysian fields were made,
> Thine were the notes that Orpheus play'd;
> By thee was Pluto charm'd so well
> While rapture seized the sons of hell--
> Come, O come--perceiv'd by none,
> You and I will walk alone. (149-54)

The last two lines separate imagination from the empirical world. It is "perceived by none" because it is an internal sense known only to each individual person. Therefore the speaker and his imagination must "walk alone" for each person's fancy is unique and cannot be shared among others.

The images delineated in the middle 120 lines of the poem are the same creations of romantic imagination that Freneau questions in "The American Village" and "The Farmer's Winter Evening." But they also represent the activity of mind that was popular among mid-century British

poets, the use of memory liberated from sensory experience to tie together unrelated images stored in the mind and produce new images not found in nature (Vitzthum 72). Harry Hayden Clark cites Joseph Warton's "Ode to Fancy," published in 1746, and Joseph Addison's prose series "The Pleasures of the Imagination" in The Spectator (numbers 411-421) as probable influences on "The Power of Fancy."[5] What thus appears to have developed in the 1770's is a tension between the romanticism and Berkeleyan idealism of the British models from which he learned to fashion verses and the Common Sense realism that insisted on an empirical view of the world.

Though Freneau may have first composed "The Power of Fancy" as early as 1770, it is unlikely that this conflict between imagination and realism was settled after The American Village appeared two years later. "The House of Night," another poem laden with romantic imagery unrelated to sense experiences, appeared in August 1779 in United States Magazine, though there is evidence suggesting that the poem may have been composed as early as 1775. The final stanza cites the poet/speaker's age as twenty-three (Freneau was born in 1752), and the heavy atmosphere that characterizes the poem resembles the tone of many of the notes Freneau made during his theological studies in the mid 1770's.[6] In addition, Leary sees similarities between the coffins, shrouds, and horrors of the tomb that permeate

the verse and both Freneau's morbid moralizing in his theology notes and James Hervey's Meditations and Contemplations Among the Tombs, a recommended text for students of divinity (That Rascal Freneau, 375).

The theological influences go beyond Freneau's studies, however, for "The House of Night" also belongs to a mid-eighteenth century school of religious literature that deals with the spiritual significance of death (Adkins 9). The two most frequently cited literary influences on the poem are Robert Blair's "The Grave" (1743) and Edward Young's Night Thoughts (1742-46), both of which deal with mortality and immortality through sentimental melancholy and Gothic terror. But several critics also note that, unlike these and other works of the period using death and its associated images for didactic religious purposes, the 1779 version of "The House of Night" does not develop consistently the theme of Christian salvation. Both H.H. Clark and Edwin Cady consider the poem first and foremost a Gothic work that exploits the traditions of graveyard and evangelical poetry for irreligious purposes ("Literary Influences" 19; "Archetypal Poet" 12). Cady, in fact, goes on to point out that the references to theology in the poem create the Gothic complexity and suggestiveness that Poe recommended in "The Philosophy of Composition" (13). More important, Adkins argues that, while "The House of Night" may have sprung from Freneau's theological studies, its true impulse

was romantic. He notes how Hervey and Young both contrast reason and fancy in a manner similar to Freneau and cites Young's belief in the spiritual power of dreams to lift the mind to higher realms (12). Thus while the death of Death may seem to possess orthodox religious implications about spiritual immortality, "The House of Night," like "The Power of Fancy," uses phantasmagoria to present a similar tribute to the power of the imagination (Lovelock 53).

As early as the second stanza of the poem, the speaker argues for the superiority of imaginative thought over empirical experience:

> Stranger believe the truth experience tells;
> Poetic dreams are of a finer cast
> Than those which oe'er the sober brain diffus'd
> Are but a repetition of some action past.[7]

Freneau has thus already set up a proposition similar to the one in "The Power of Fancy"; the imagination, especially the artistic imagination, operates independently of the empirical mind or "sober brain" that recreates images out of the world it sees. By describing the source of his inspiration as "some sad means the mind cannot recall" (9) the speaker asserts that no empirical reference exists from which his vision could be drawn. In fact, the succeeding images in stanzas four through nine prove to be anything but records of the physical world.

The speaker describes woods that are supposedly in the

"fairest vernal bloom" (13), yet his "fancy" cannot see the colorful flowers and green fields. Instead he sees only naked trees against a clear horizon that displays no "friendly star" (17) and signs all around not of regeneration but of wild threats. Under the surrounding darkness, the speaker hears roaring wolves, clamoring bears, and loud winds whipping up giant waves on the Chesapeke [sic], where his "picturing fancy form[s]/The black ship" (27-28), suggesting a vision whose significance is never explained. And in the midst of the buildings that suddenly appear to him is a garden reflecting an "autumnal hue" (30) in the middle of spring, its flowers "drooping...Amidst high weeds that in rank plenty grew" (31-32). To these are added "unhappy plants and trees" (34) notably the yew, willow, and elm, traditional symbols of gloom and death. All of these unnatural descriptions create an aura of psychological distortion in which sensations of the natural world have been recombined into bizarre associations (Vitzthum 75).

That the empirical world has no place here is reinforced after the speaker enters this "house of night." Before he climbs the winding stairs to Death's chamber, he overhears disputes among a group of physicians about surgery and possible remedies. He notes that they speak "Of femoris, trochanters, and whate'er/ Has been discuss'd by Cheselden and Mead," (47-48) two famous anatomists, and of "proofs from Galen and Hippocrates" (50). But the

physicians' debate and its emphasis on science and observation abruptly ends as the speaker asserts that fancy is the dominant force, leading him away from the argument and toward the chamber of Death.

The building gothicism of the poem reaches its climax when the speaker enters the chamber and finds the personified Death on his own deathbed:

> My frighted eyes a horrid form survey'd!
> Death, dreary death, upon the gloomy couch,
> With flesh-less limbs in rueful form was laid.
>
> High o'er his head flew jealousies and cares:
> Ghosts, imps, and half the black Tartarian crew,
> Arch-Angels damn'd, nor was their prince remote,
> Borne on the vaporous wings of Stygian dew.
>
> (62-68)

Death quickly proves to be more than a symbolic figure in a struggle between oblivion and Christian salvation. Instead he becomes a well-rounded, malignant personality, celebrating his triumphs while inciting the scorn of the "comely youth" who is watching over him, yet also expressing fear at his own demise. He notes with pleasure the horrors of the physical world, the "Fevers and plagues, with all their sickly stores" (92), the "guileful calenture" (93) that deceives sailors by creating illusions of land in the middle of the sea, and the ocean storms that "dash the well-

mann'd galley to the shore" (100), but he then turns around and asks for works of holy authors as if desperately seeking his own salvation. Through Freneau's ironic and bizarre twist of the graveyard traditions of Young and Blair, Death has been turned from an agent into a victim of gothic horror.

The remainder of the poem retains its surrealistic tone through a variety of devices. The speaker, honoring the request of Death to engrave his tombstone with an epitaph, suddenly finds himself outside once again, yet continues to relate the pain of Death's last moments as if he were still in the chamber. He also sees "spectre forms" surrounding the tomb by a "waving light/Walking in horrid circles round...." (127-28) as the corpse is laid to rest. Yet as he is about to inscribe the epitaph on the tomb, the entire scene disappears, and his dream ends.

The concluding stanzas reaffirm both the pervasive power of imagination and its value to the artist. In seeking to explain this bizarre vision to himself, the speaker asks the reader:

> Say does thy nightly fancy rove like mine;
> Transport thee o'er wide land and wider seas
> Now underneath the pole and now the burning line?
> (278-80)

In a reprise of a major theme of "The Power of Fancy," the human imagination, freed from any ties to sense experience,

wanders the world at will creating new images. But for the artist, imagination is more than a liberation of the mind; it is a link to the past and to the same imaginative spirit that moved artists of the past to create:

> Poet, who thus dost rove, say, shall thou fear
> New Jordan's stream prefigured by the old?
> It will but waft thee where thy fathers are
> The bards with long eternity enroll'd.
>
> (281-84)

Imagination thus encompasses all of humanity, past and present, and artists in the living world share a common creative power with their predecessors; the contemporary creations represented by "New Jordan's stream" are drawn from, or "prefigured by," those of the past. In these last stanzas "The House of Night" transcends the influences of graveyard poetry and gothic romanticism to assert the legitimate power of imaginative thought and justify the wild extravagance of the poem's strange story. The speaker asks himself if this vision is a premonition of his own death, but he instead concludes that it is an affirmation of the power of fancy.

The poems discussed above reveal a young poet wavering in his embrace of romantic images and models. "The Power of Fancy" and "The House of Night," if we accept their composition dates of 1770 and 1775 respectively, chronologically surround poems that call into question the

romantic idealism they celebrate. Surely the influence of contemporary British models played a substantial role in the evolution of both "The Power of Fancy" and "The House of Night" as did the lingering influence of Berkeleyan idealism even after Freneau's exposure to Witherspoon's Common Sense philosophy. But the poet's continued application of empirical observation to the phenomena of nature further eroded his romantic bent, particularly in his evolving estimation of the role of nature.

III. The Fall of Nature

Though "The Beauties of Santa Cruz" appeared in United States Magazine in February, 1779, six months before "The House of Night" appeared, it probably was first composed in 1777,[8] two years after the composition of the latter work and during Freneau's first visit to the Caribbean. Its subject, the lush beauty of a tropical island, seems to be a reprise of the imagined island of "The American Village," but what distinguishes this poem from the earlier work is its abundance of concrete imagery, particularly its frequent appeal to sight, sound, and taste. The rich physical detail of the poem prompted Lewis Leary to describe it as an attempt "to adapt the technique of a miniature painter to a gigantic canvas, because all that [Freneau] saw was so logical in its beauty, harmony, and proportion" (That Rascal Freneau 71). In this respect, "The Beauties of Santa Cruz" probably represents Freneau's strongest commitment to

empirical reality in his still young career. But, more important, that commitment is also reflected in the balanced view he takes toward this tropical world, for the beauty, abundance, and comfort afforded by the island are undermined by threats of poison, addiction, and natural violence.

The image of Santa Cruz at the beginning of the poem seems to be benign; the speaker promises a world of "perpetual green" (10) filled with "ever-verdant plants" (12), "trees [that] bloom throughout the year" (35), and "fragrant Flora [that] wear a lasting smile" (36). Even the weather is always the same, the sun's "friendly heat" (47) tempered by daily showers and trade winds. Much of this language reflects a sense of timelessness and balance that would suggest a genuine paradise, but opposing these attractions is the threat of the waters that surround the island. The speaker asks the shepherd he is addressing to put aside his timid tendency to stay close to the shores of America and dismiss any thoughts of "the dangers of the billowy deep" (13), implying that even reaching the island involves risk. He later acknowledges that the surrounding seas can be so treacherous that "the threatening waters roar on every side" (27). The potential dangers of the environment surrounding Santa Cruz indicate that perhaps this is an imperfect paradise.

Nonetheless the next several stanzas detail the many sensual delights the island has to offer. The speaker

describes a catalog of fishes and other sea creatures that surround the island as "delicious ..., salubrious food" (69) that can turn an abstemious sage into an epicure. On the island itself he lists a variety of fruits that abound everywhere, again in language focusing on sight and taste:

> Sweet orange groves in lonely vallies rise,
> And drop their fruits unnotic'd and unknown:
> The cooling acid limes in hedges grow;
> The juicy lemons swell in shades their own.
>
> Sweet spungy plumbs on trees wide spreading hang;
> The happy flavour'd pine grows crested from the ground;
> Plump grenadillo's and guava's small,
> With melons in each wood and lawn abound. (85-92)

But again in the midst of this epicurean abundance is an assortment of natural threats. Like the other fruits on Santa Cruz, the manchineal is "enticing to the smell, fair to the eye" (77), but its apple-like fruit is poisonous. Meanwhile, the wholesome kernel of the cashew is surrounded by a "poison coat indignant to the lips" (95), and the cassada shrub possesses a poison root that must be treated before it can be used. In addition to these dangers, the speaker notes that this "happiest heaven below" (158) is often torn with fierce hurricanes that "reveal Nature convuls'd in an instant" (160).

The greatest threat, however, is not lethal at all;

the sugar cane, the source of Santa Cruz's wealth, is also a narcotic, similar to the lotus plant, that leaves those who become addicted to it in a state of slothful indifference:

> Whoever sips of this inchanting juice--
> Delicious nectar, fit for Jove's own hall,
> Returns no more from his lov'd Santa Cruz,
> But quits his friends, his country, and his all.
> (137-40)

Equally sinister is the regenerative quality of the sugar cane. Like all of the other plants on the island, it requires no cultivation, for a cut stalk will grow again with the help of the tropical rains. In this respect, Santa Cruz is reminiscent of the imaginary island of "The American Village," for both are lands that give freely and provide their inhabitants with a wholly passive existence (Kolodny, 88). Yet Santa Cruz differs in being an Eden interrupted by the realities of intemperance, transience, and mortality.

Such realities, however, mean little to the speaker, for a tone of intoxication dominates the last several stanzas of the poem. Ignoring all of the dangers he has acknowledged, he returns to a theme of timelessness, praising the "eternal spring and smiling summer" (182) of the island and wondering why "heart carroding care...[could] cloud the sunshine of the mind" (183-84). But his mind is in fact clouded with lethargy, so much so that the images

he relates begin to take on an air of listlessness:

> The drowsy pelican wings home his way,
> The misty night sits heavy on the sea,
> Yon lagging sail drags slowly o'er the main.
> Night and its kindred glooms are nought to me.
>
> (185-88)

Vitzthum contends that the final line of this passage is actually an ironic admission of gloomy thoughts about both an imperfect paradise and the poet's absence from the war in America (37), but the speaker's denial of the dark aspects of nature in these lines, along with the extended discussion of the sugar cane's intoxicating powers, indicate that these are the ramblings of a dull, languid mind that sees only "smiling skies" (196) radiated by a sun rising "from the drowsy land of dreams" (192). The conclusion of the poem confirms the speaker's lethargic attitude. He determines that the unconvinced northern shepherd he has been addressing should remain and fight the British while he remains to "sing with rapture [the] inspiring shades" (208) of Santa Cruz. In doing so, he contrasts his own passive indolence with the shepherd's energetic action and thereby reaffirms the island's seductive qualities.

Numerous critics have viewed "The Beauties of Santa Cruz" as another step in Freneau's rejection of the pastoral ideal.[9] Certainly the contrast of the island's sensuous lures with its concurrent dangers undercuts the pastoral

image, but Freneau's objective view of the natural world, in which he relies on concrete realism, a break from eighteenth-century abstraction and generality, is more significant. The descriptive passages of Santa Cruz create a physical paradise that also contains the seeds of its own destruction, for the dangers mentioned represent the darker side of the visible world. Edwin Cady contends that Freneau did not know what to do with these rich physical descriptions, for, in setting up a "smiling teleology" against natural evil, the poet could not decide what to think of the snake in Eden (15-18). But the conclusion, or lack of a conclusion, may be secondary to Freneau's discovery of a natural world in flux; the co-existence of pleasure and pain, of paradise and terror, observed by an empirical eye suggest a chaos and epistemological uncertainty that would grow more profound in the next decade.

Two brief lyrics also appearing in United States Magazine a few months after the publication of "The Beauties of Santa Cruz" reinforce the darker side of nature Freneau began to explore and the empirical means he used to discover it. "The Dying Elm," published in June, 1779, focuses on a theme that dominated much of Freneau's collegiate work but was mentioned only briefly in "The Beauties of Santa Cruz," the transience of existence. Unlike "Santa Cruz," however, it examines its theme not through the description of a broad

landscape of natural observations but through the application of such poetic devices as personification, symbolism, and biblical allusion to a single observation, an elm tree dying from disease and drought. The poem is quoted here in its entirety:

Sweet, lovely elm, who here dost grow,
Companion of my musing care;
Lo, thy dejected branches die,
Amid the burning air;
Smit by the sun or sickly moon,
Like fainting flow'rs that die at noon.

Thy withering leaves that drooping hang,
Presage thy end approaching nigh,
And lo, thy amber tears distil,
Attended with thy last remaining sigh.
O gentle tree no more decline,
But be thy shade and love-sick whispers mine.

Short is thy life if thou so soon must fade,
Like angry Jonah's gourd at Nineveh,
That in a night its bloomy branches spread,
And flourish'd for a day.
Come then revive, sweet shady elm, lest I,
Thro' vehemence of heat, like Jonah, wish to die.

The withering and drooping leaves indicate the drought-

stricken elm's condition, as do the "amber tears," which may be an antitoxin trickling from the bark (Vitzthum 40). But these same "tears" are also one of several personifications that act as a projection of the speaker's attitude about mortality. The elm's "dejected branches," "love-sick whispers," and "last remaining sigh" express the speaker's "musing care," his discouragement over the brevity of not only the elm's existence, but his as well. The spectre of his own transience prompts the speaker to plead for the elm's revival in the second and third stanzas, which is in fact a plea for the reversal of his own fate.

The allusion to Jonah's gourd at Nineveh adds to the sense of transience, for the comparison of the elm with its one-day cycle of life and death radically heightens the sense of decay. The reference to "angry Jonah," whose prophecy of doom at Nineveh proves false when God decides to spare the city, also has significance for the poem's theme. The "vehemence of heat" that threatens Jonah also agitates the speaker, for both are essentially disappointed, Jonah in his role of false prophet and the speaker in his loss of the tradition of natural renewal, replaced by the mutability of existence.

But it is the symbolism of the elm itself that is the key to the poem's meaning. Both Vitzthum and Griffith have pointed out the classical significance of the elm and its role in the poem. Griffith contends that Freneau's elm is

connected to the elm at the gates of Hades in Vergil's Aeneid in that both represent false dreams and delusion. Thus the "shade" of a revived elm would mean not only protection from the heat but also revival of the illusion of renewal (49-50). Vitzthum also connects this poem to Vergil's elm, but interprets Freneau's dying tree as the demise of his poetic dreams, savaged by the "burning air" of partisanship and the "vehement heat" of his political and propagandic verse. However, he also sees "the inescapable connotations of death" in the elm, particularly its emblematic implication that the only avenue to a communion with nature is death (41-44). Freneau expressed a similar attitude in "The Farmer's Winter Evening," before finally rejecting it because such a romantic impulse also meant the submergence of empirical reality in fantasy.

The devices Freneau uses in "The Dying Elm" may be romantic, but the impulse is not. Its tone, created out of the personification of and direct address toward a natural object, may seem sentimental or melancholy, but its focus on human transience is based on the realistic observation that this is a finite world. The plea for revival in the final stanza may indicate the poet's reluctance to accept such harsh realities, and it is a plea that will be repeated more stridently, and perhaps more sadly, in the next decade. But "The Dying Elm" nonetheless overturns the romantic convention of renewal in favor of the finality of death for

both nature and humanity.

In the companion poem from the July issue of United States Magazine, "Columbus to Ferdinand," Freneau obscures meaning far less with symbolism and allusion, yet this brief portrait of Columbus provides further proof of the poet's growing faith in realism and empirical observation. Unlike the speakers in poems such as "The American Village" or "The Farmer's Winter Evening," Freneau's Columbus possesses an active mind that would rather seek knowledge than retire into imaginative fancies. To persuade Ferdinand to sponsor exploratory voyages of the western seas, he asks questions about what may lie to the west: what lands, what people, what creatures might there be on the other side of the ocean. And he does indeed imagine that "beyond the billowy waste/ Island and men and animals and trees" (23-24) might exist. But his speculations are not the stuff of romantic dreams about benevolent primitive cultures or a benign and beautiful nature; they instead possess a rational sense of order and proportion. It seems illogical, he argues, that the western sun would "light the waves and monsters of the sea" (22) only or that the moon would "spend her sweet beam upon the barren main" (14). He refuses to believe that the creator would build such a disproportioned planet:

> Should the vast circuit of the world contain
> Such lengths of ocean and such scanty land?
> 'Tis reason's voice that bids me think not so,

I think more nobly of the Almighty hand. (17-20)

As an additional argument, he refers to the reasoning of Plato, who predicted the discovery of "a mighty land/ Far far away, where none have roved before" (33-34).

But Columbus does not merely speculate about the possibilities of a new world. He is determined to find empirical proof for his theories, for he is convinced humans possess the intelligence to find answers to the types of questions he has posed through their ability to exploit and control nature. He notes how sailors have used the confines of the Mediterranean Sea to hone their sailing and shipbuilding skills without venturing far from land and then cites how "nature has unveil'd" (31) the principles of the compass so that explorers could take on the risks entailed with sailing far into the Atlantic. Thus prepared, he declares that "Reason shall steer, and skill disarm the gale" (56), an indication of his faith in human intellect and the need for its active application to the natural world.

"Columbus to Ferdinand" is an unusual poem for this period in Freneau's career. Its emphasis on the active application of intelligence to manage nature is a theme more proper to Freneau's work after 1790. Numerous lines describe Columbus' dynamic state of mind: he is "fir'd by the theme" (37) of discovery, describing it as "an unremitting flame in [his] breast" (25), even as he reads

"Plato's raptur'd page" (29) about the possibility of undiscovered lands. Yet the poem still makes a significant statement about the poet's continuing inner debate between imagination and empirical realism, for the verification of speculation with observable fact indicates that empiricism was beginning to eclipse imagination in Freneau's mind. It is not coincidence that the word "fancy" does not appear in the poem, for Columbus' arguments are dominated by realism and reason (Vitzthum 39). Of all the speakers or persona in Freneau's work prior to 1780, this version of Columbus most clearly anticipates the ascendancy of directly observed experience, which would dominate Freneau's work for the rest of his career.

The proof that Columbus so ardently wishes to find is explored in "Discovery," which did not appear until 1786 in Freneau's first collection but bears a composition date of 1772 below the title. The polish of the verse suggests the poem went through several revisions before publication,[10] yet its examination of primitivism through a comparison of Indian and European cultures fits the exploration of romantic themes and attitudes that mark several of the poems of the 1770's. Regardless of their dates of composition, the two poems share a thematic line; "Columbus to Ferdinand" describes the reasoning and motivations behind the exploration of the New World, while "Discovery" tells of the results. The opening lines of "Discovery" recall Columbus'

speculations about new lands beyond the limits of the known world:

> Six thousand years in these dull regions pass'd,
> 'Tis time, you'll say, we knew their bounds at last,
> Knew to what skies our setting stars retire,
> And where the wint'ry suns expand their fire;
> What land to land protracts the varied scene,
> And where extended oceans roll between; (1-6)

The poem then acknowledges the "art," meaning the shipbuilding skills and seamanship, that would allow the Europeans to take the risks associated with sailing into the far Atlantic and discover "new millions of the human race" (14). But though the initial lines of the poem treat the impulse toward discovery as a worthy trait in its own right (Andrews, "Freneau and Hopkinson" 142), "Discovery" deals not with Columbus' dream and European valor but with the romantic image of the "noble savage," set against the greed and tyranny of their invaders.

As heroic as the European vision of exploration and discovery may have been, Freneau argues that the result has been oppressive. The Europeans have used their skill and science to feed their avarice, either under the pretense of religious conversion or by the exertion of political and military power. Declaring that "few [Europeans] sail'd on virtue's nobler plan" (35), Freneau judges them "Superior only by superior art" (39); in dealing with primitive

cultures, they are oppressive and intolerant. In comparison, the native culture presented is passive and contented, a conventional pastoral image:

> On them warm suns with equal splendor shine,
> And each domestic pleasure equals thine,
> Their native groves a happier bloom display,
> As self-contented roll their lives away,
> And the gay soul, in fancy's visions blest,
> Leaves to the care of chance her heaven of rest.
>
> (73-78)

These Indians, of course, also recall the ideal primitive culture in "The American Village" in their blissfulness and the easy toil which sustains them. The superiority of such natural goodness becomes more pointed when Freneau asks whether the achievements of European culture are "But arts destructive to the bliss of man?" (80)

Yet when Freneau admonishes the European invaders to "leave religion and thy laws at home/ Leave the free native to enjoy his store" (90-91), he does so not for the sake of saving an innocent world but because the Indians too possess their share of tyranny and cruelty. They inflict "revenge and death" (97) upon each other with their own primitive weapons, each side the victim of its own "pining envy" (98) and the ambitions of despots who are "Through life detested, and ador'd when dead" (106). Meanwhile their priests inflict their own brand of cruelty by practicing human

sacrifices in the name of their religion. The contrast between the brutal European and the gentle savage dissolves as Freneau finds the same evils, despotism and religion, in both cultures and concludes that "Dupes to a few the race of man is found" (108).

"Discovery" is indeed a story of discovery, but in two distinct senses. On one level, the poem condemns the exploitive and oppressive results of the European discovery of the New World, but on another it reveals that the Edenic world of a Santa Cruz is truly a myth, even from a primitivist perspective. Just as Santa Cruz's natural beauties are undermined with their own darker side, so too are the primitive cultures that inhabit such new worlds. As for the cause of this darker side of the "noble savage," critical opinion is divided. Annette Kolodny calls "Discovery" yet another example of the erosion of the pastoral in Freneau's thinking, though she finds the cause in the violence of the invading Europeans rather than in any universal human shortcomings (87). Mary Bowden, on the other hand, describes the Indians as less noble and more European than we might expect from the primitive ideal and concludes that Freneau's primitivism is inconsistent, because the poet used the persona of the traditional "noble savage" elsewhere, as in the Tomo Cheeki series of essays in the 1790's (36). But Freneau also found romantic primitivism to be a useful tool for presenting social and

political criticisms (Vitzthum 29), so its later appearance does not necessarily imply a changing attitude. For the growing realist in Freneau, the primitivist ideal is no more legitimate than an eternally benevolent nature or its promise of perpetual renewal.

IV. Freneau as Materialist

In his biography of Freneau, Jacob Axelrad distinguishes the poet from his American predecessors by noting that, while Bradstreet, Wigglesworth, and Taylor viewed the world as a chimera and heaven as the only reality, Freneau believed that the world he lived in was the one reality above all others (44). The evolution of the debate between imagination and empiricism that dominates the poetry of the 1770's suggests that myth and speculation would give way to direct observation as the only acceptable source of knowledge. Freneau finds the pastoral idealism of "The American Village" and "The Farmer's Winter Evening" to be intellectually incoherent in a transient world and the imaginative creations of "The Power of Fancy" and "The House of Night" insubstantial in the face of concrete realism. It is this realism that invades the paradise of "The Beauties of Santa Cruz" and dismantles the tradition of natural renewal in "The Dying Elm." As he discards ideals of pastoralism, imagination, primitivism, and natural renewal, Freneau turns to the material world and physical sensation as the foundation of his view of human existence.

In no poem of the 1770's is this more evident than in "The Jamaica Funeral," which, like "Discovery," did not appear until the publication of the 1786 collection yet bears a 1776 date of composition. At the center of the poem is a lusty parson, an obvious lover of the sensual life, who is summoned to conduct a funeral service but instead explains to the mourners the necessity of viewing human existence as materialistic. As a believer in a life of the senses, he embraces a world that is verifiable by sense impressions only. All ideas that are not material, including concepts of God and afterlife, are unverifiable and are therefore rejected out of hand. In the place of more orthodox religious views, he presents human life as a cyclical existence, in which our corporeal bodies return to the dust and darkness from which they came. Even death itself "is nothing but an empty name" (Poems of Freneau 124-33, l. 178) because all we know of death is what we see at the funeral, the corpse of the deceased Alcander; therefore why, the parson asks, should we "bemoan that tepid mass"? (142) That a churchman should be the spokesman for a materialistic view of existence is surely ironic, yet it is his station that makes him such an unexpected and thus effective mouthpiece for the sensuality and religious sterility that dominate the poem.

Despite the solemn occasion, sensuality surrounds the actions of nearly every mourner in the poem. Those who

first call for mourning at the death of the wealthy Alcander call not for tears but for fine dress and generous amounts of food and drink in honor of their friend (at the expense of the deceased, of course). When the parson appears at the house of Alcander, his preoccupation is not with the mourners or the deceased but with wine and food:

> With far-fetch'd dainties he regal'd his maw,
> And prais'd the various meats that crown'd the board;
> On tender capon's did the glutton gnaw,
> And well his platter with profusion stor'd.
>
> (77-80)

Even in his sermon he mourns not Alcander but the loss of the deceased's cellars and board. Though his actions appear to be those of a drunkard, his celebrations of food and especially wine come to symbolize the dominance of the senses in human experience. He calls sensual pleasures an immortal theme and considers life without the senses "a punishment...[and a] Greenland winter without heat or light" (159-60). There is also a sense of urgency to his hedonistic philosophy, for it is at least partially driven by the transience of a physical world where "September comes, seas swell with horrid gales" (171), and death becomes "a debt [that] to nature must be paid" (176).

But what comes after death? For the materialist parson, existence is based on sense impressions; thus "when nature fails," or when a corporeal being can no longer

experience the natural world, "man exists no more" (177). With no conception of soul or spiritual survival, the parson views death as an eternal state of non-existence, a disintegration of the body into the elements from which it came:

> You ask me where these mighty hosts have fled,
> That once existed on this changeful ball?--
> If aught remains, when mortal man is dead,
> Where, ere their birth they were, they now are all.
> . . . . . .
> Night comes at last, and, weary of the fray,
> To dust and darkness all return again. (181-88)

The parson's rejection of mind-body dualism and survival of the soul also reflects Freneau's familiarity with Lucretius' De rerum natura, part of the extensive classical background he received in grammar school and at Princeton.[11] In the third book of De rerum natura, Lucretius argues that the mind and body develop and decay together and are affected simultaneously by external stimuli, such as medicine or alcohol, proof of the mind's connection to the body and consequent mortality (III, ll. 98-240). The parson's declaration that we return "to dust and darkness" is also Lucretian, an adaptation of Lucretius' atomic theories concerning the aggregation and ultimate disintegration of matter (Adkins 71).

Naturally, the parson's materialistic thinking affects

the performance of his religious duties. The ceremonies he performs take on an air of cynicism and insincerity, done out of a sense of duty rather than conviction. His behavior when he first enters Alcander's home is less than solemn and comforting, not only in his hedonistic desires but also in his casual conversations and determination to collect parish dues. He offers no blessing before the meal and twice mutters "learned" prayers that are "cut and dry" (102) before the sermon begins. His demeanor changes only as he is about to deliver his hedonistic message, when his eyes "like sultry Phoebus glow'd" and an air of genuine inspiration overcomes him. From this point, all sense of duty to orthodox Christian values vanishes, for his first remark, "More I esteem, and better is by far/ A dog existing than a lion dead" (123-24) and subsequent materialist doctrine, denies Christian eschatology and embraces the living world as the only reality we can possibly know.

The materialism of "The Jamaica Funeral" provides a suitable foundation for the empirical realism that would dominate Freneau's writings in the next decade. Its emphasis on the physical world and on sense impressions can be traced to the Common Sense tenet that we possess direct contact with objective reality. It is this point of view that reveals both the nurturing and destructive sides of nature in "The Beauties of Santa Cruz" and the reality of decay and death in "The Dying Elm." Yet the materialist

view also differs from the Common Sense school in determining that all knowledge is derived from sensations. Common Sense thinkers, we will recall, also argued for an innate moral sense of right and wrong which, when applied to external experiences, allowed humans to determine moral truths. By the end of the 1770's, however, Freneau's work shows no predeliction toward any a priori moral sense but rather a firm belief in perceiving and reacting to the material world as the poet sees it. Nonetheless, "The Jamaica Funeral" does raise the issues of the existence of a supreme being and the possibility of afterlife for the first time. Dismissed here as irrelevant in a materialist's universe, they would begin to occupy Freneau more and more in the 1780's as his empiricism proved to be an inadequate solution.

Endnotes

[1] Freneau included dates of composition for some of the poems appearing in the 1786 collection. These dates are not always reliable, but in his bibliography to Freneau's poetry in That Rascal Freneau, Leary accepts the dates for "The Poetical History of the Prophet Jonah," "The Pyramids of Egypt," and "The Monument of Phaon" as accurate. Succeeding critics and biographers have accepted Leary's conclusions.

[2] See Gibbens for a detailed discussion of the similarities between Freneau's early verse and that of the English preromantics.

[3] See Griffith, p. 33. William Andrews in "Goldsmith and Freneau in 'The American Village,'" Early American Literature, V (Fall 1970) 14-23, describes the poem as a "conscious literary response" to the issues raised by Goldsmith in "The Deserted Village."

[4] Laurence Holland, "Philip Freneau: Poet of a New Nation," in Laurence Holland, Nathaniel Burt, and A. Walton Litz, The Literary Heritage of New Jersey (Princeton: Van Nostrand, 1964), 12-14, calls the concluding lines a retreat from the reality of social problems, an echo of Leary's comment in That Rascal Freneau that "The American Village" is an escape from "the noisy affairs of civilization" (40). Andrews calls the conclusion a promise to retreat to rural life in old age to embrace a philosophic calm rejecting intellectually ambitions. Vitzthum sees the last fifty lines as implying that isolation in nature would possibly provide a hint of its benevolence.

[5] "The Literary Influences of Philip Freneau," Studies in Philology, 22 (January 1925) 9-10. See also Thomas P. Haviland's "A Measure of the Early Freneau's Debt to Milton," PMLA, 55 (1940): 1033-1040, who finds Freneau's debt in "The Power of Fancy" is to Milton, not Warton.

[6] In That Rascal Freneau (48-52) Leary includes several passages from Freneau's theological notebooks as an indication of Freneau's state of mind during this period.

[7] Hiltner 55-68, ll. 4-8. All references to Freneau's newspaper verse are from this edition and will be denoted by line numbers.

[8] See United States Magazine I (February, 1779), 81-88. The prose piece that accompanies the poem in United States Magazine states that it was "composed near two years ago" in Santa Cruz.

[9] See Vitzthum, p. 37; Kolodny, p. 88; and Holland, p. 20.

[10] In That Rascal Freneau 44, Leary accepts 1772 as the original date of composition, though he suspects it underwent much revision. He may find 1772 a logical date for "Discovery" because he also accepts the date given by Freneau to "Columbus to Ferdinand" (1770) in the 1786 collection, a poem that shares several themes with "Discovery."

[11] See Adkins, pp. 57-77, for a full discussion of classical influences on Freneau. A translation of part of the third book of De rerum natura appears in Freneau's 1809 collection.

CHAPTER 3: THE FAILURE OF EMPIRICISM: CHAOS AND THE STOIC RESPONSE

Freneau's inclination toward empirical sources of knowledge at the beginning of the 1780's was a reflection of a broader intellectual debate going on in America during the latter part of the eighteenth century. Though Locke had dominated the minds of Americans during the first half of the century in areas ranging from epistemological issues to educational beliefs, those same minds eventually welcomed arguments that sought to prove that ideas were derived from sources other than experience and were common to people in all ages and in all lands. In an essay on late eighteenth century intellectual conflicts in America, Leon Howard cites speculation about "self-evident" knowledge, which insisted on the existence of an "inner sense" that spontaneously distinguished between right and wrong or beauty and ugliness, and "rational" knowledge, which relied on the power of humans to draw simple inductions or inferences from observations as well as their ability to reach distinct conclusions from commonly accepted premises (62-68). Joel Barlow accepted both of these forms of knowledge, as well as empirical or scientific knowledge, as three classifications of commonly accepted truth. But Americans were nonetheless inclined to consider truth demonstrated by direct experience as more desirable than that determined by

speculation; thus Locke's "Essay Concerning Human Understanding" continued to be the standard text of "mental science" at American colleges, and robust empiricism remained the outstanding practical characteristic of the American mind (Howard 75).

Freneau was very much a part of this intellectual mainstream, for the poetry he produced between 1780 and 1788 represents the zenith of his empirical approach to the world. But the philosophic results from the very beginning of this period reflect an unsettled and dissatisfied mind. The romantic model of a benign natural world, questioned in the previous decade by "The Beauties of Santa Cruz" and "The Dying Elm," was now wholly replaced by a nature that was more destructive than nurturing, more chaotic than orderly. Concurrently, the lack of any tangible evidence concerning the existence of a supreme being or the possibility of the immortality of the soul drives the arid spiritual landscape of some of Freneau's best lyrics, notably "Verses Made at Sea in a Heavy Gale," "The Wild Honeysuckle," and "The Indian Burying Ground." He even begins to question the empiricism he has embraced; "The Vernal Ague," "Captain Jones' Invitation," and "The Lost Adventurer," among other poems, question the human ability to understand a world where material perceptions are the sole source of knowledge.

Illusion and disappointment may best characterize much of the work of what we may call Freneau's "empirical"

period, for what appears before the empirical eye is for Freneau a less than compelling or incomplete picture of the material and spiritual worlds. The tone of this entire period may in fact be exemplified in one of its earliest poems, "A Moral Thought," which first appeared on October 24, 1781, in The Freeman's Journal, a Philadelphia weekly edited by Freneau from the fall of 1781 to approximately the end of 1782.[1] The poem is a very tightly packed example of the surface illusions of nature and the dismaying reality that rests beneath that surface. The first two stanzas present a now familiar argument against a romantic view of nature. The "gay scenes [that] attract our eyes" (1) in youth and their accompanying "flow'ry fields" (3) also possess their "winter day" (4) of decay. Eventually these "vain pursuits... Convince us that life is but a dream" (5-6), a pedestrian restatement of an equally familiar transience-of-life theme. But the final two lines of stanza two present an obtuse moral about our fleeting existence: "Death is to wake to rise again,/To that true life I best esteem" (7-8). What sounds like an orthodox call for a Christian resurrection and redemption is in fact the speaker's realization that it is his mortality that shakes him from these "gay scenes" and "flow'ry fields" and demands that he face the empirical truth of existence. It is the detached observer who lives the "true life" unfettered by romantic illusion or religious orthodoxy.

The second two stanzas of the poem provide a metaphor from nature that illustrates both the illusion and the hidden reality:

So nightly on the flowing tide,
    Oft have I seen a raree-show;
Reflected stars on either side,
    And glittering moons were seen below.

But when the tide had ebb'd away,
    The scene fantastic with it fled,
A bank of mud around me lay,
    And sea-weed on the river's bed. (9-16)

The "reflected stars" and "glittering moons" of this "raree show," a term suggesting the quality of a peep show, are insubstantial and shallow, for they merely reflect the images of the sky. Their existence depends on the ebb and flow of the tide, and once that tide recedes we see a grim reality beneath the image. The lifeless mud and limp sea-weed revealed at the bottom of the river symbolically suggest the decay and death that exist below the "gay scenes" of stanza one and enhance the assertion of life's transience in stanza two. The life the speaker "best esteems" is therefore one rooted in a realism that accepts the finality of existence and explicitly denies conventional religious belief.

The speaker's position in the middle of the shifting

tides provides further evidence of his commitment to a firm realistic view. Because he sees the reflected stars in the water "on either side" and then finds himself surrounded by the barren bank of mud, he is forced to confront nature's deceptions and the cold realization of his own mortality. Both Leary (That Rascal Freneau 100) and Vitzthum (50) recognize the resentment the speaker feels toward both the deception of nature and the disappointing truth revealed in the image of the sea-weed, yet both also recognize the importance Freneau finds in the human ability to face empirical reality. When he changed the title of the poem to "The Vanity of Existence" in his 1795 collection of poems, Freneau confirmed its emphasis on the spiritual emptiness of a finite existence, and it is this emphasis, often born of the deceptions of nature found in material observations, that would mark Freneau's work during most of the 1780's.

I. The Paradox Within Nature

Perhaps the most obvious product of Freneau's empirical approach is the contradictions he found in nature. To be sure, "The American Village" and "The Beauties of Santa Cruz," among other works of the previous decade, note a darker side of the natural world, but such threats are presented to question an ideal image of benevolence. The nurturing side of nature, whatever dangers may co-exist within it, is never abandoned. Many lyrics of the

succeeding decade, however, challenge the basic goodness of nature itself, finding the seeds of destruction within its very substance.

"Plato the Philosopher, to his Friend Theon," which first appeared in The Freeman's Journal on January 2, 1782, uses the decay within nature as a paradigm of the general decay of all existence, including man, as the philosopher's argument for accepting the transience of human life. Theon wishes to hold on to his earthly existence as long as he can, but Plato argues that all things decay in the corporeal world. Theon has lost his youth and, with it, many of the pleasures of life. He must now prepare himself for the vault of the grave, says Plato, for while the cycles of the natural world will soon go on, the existence of humans does not: "Autumnal seasons shall return/ And spring shall bloom, but not for you" (11-12). Yet, as Freneau has already pointed out in "The Dying Elm," the renewal of nature is false, for all living things ultimately wind down to nothing. It is from this perspective that Plato asks Theon why he should be so reluctant to leave the "barren and bleak abode" (16) of human existence. Plato is well aware that destruction is a part of life and cites the daily deaths in nature as reason to accept human decay:

Subjected to perpetual ills
A thousand deaths around us grow,
The frost the tender blossom kills

And roses wither as they blow.

Cold nipping winds thy fruits assail,
The infant apple seeks the ground
The peaches fall, the cherries fail
The grape receives a fatal wound. (21-28)

The images in these two stanzas represent a striking change in Freneau's attitude toward nature, for here the very life force that has created beauty and plenty appears equally predisposed to destroy its own creation. Thus frosts kill the flower blossoms and cold destroys the fruits that sustain life. In the next stanza, as if to question the stability of nature, Plato notes how the breeze that "gently ought to blow" (29) can become a storm and how the sun that "charm[s] the grass to grow" (31) can burn the earth it is supposed to nurture. Even mountains, shores, and streams, which seem permanent during a normal human life span, are subject to change over longer periods of time. This is all "nature's play" (35), says Plato, for nature is indifferent to all material existence, even in the cosmos, where eventually the sun itself will go dark and "leave the world to mother night/ A farce, a phantom, or a dream" (39-40). Unlike the vision of "The Beauties of Santa Cruz," where the contrasts of nature are still accepted as part of a paradise, this view is full of pessimism about the fate of humanity in a world where "to live is nothing but to

grieve" (44).

Plato attributes the necessity for such an attitude to the constant flux of the physical world. Clear meanings become clouded, hope and expectation become "the airy phantom [that] flies" (51), and disruptive monarchs die, their careers turning to dust. Under such change the world is "mere emptiness and vanity" (60). Plato's frequent use of such words as "phantom," "dream," and "emptiness" becomes ironic, for they describe the result of an empirically based argument; the philosopher looks at the physical world around him and concludes that it is in fact insubstantial.

As in "A Moral Thought," disappointing observations of the material world lead to speculations about whatever supernal world may exist. Once he has concluded that earthly existence becomes little more than a shadow, Plato cries out:

> Give me the stars, give me the skies,
> Give me the heaven's remotest sphere,
> Above these gloomy scenes to rise
> Of desolation and despair. (61-64)

What follows is a vague description of what may be considered an afterlife, where "sweeter blossoms blow" (75) and "green eternal crowns the year" (78). But the outline of such a world remains blurred, for the thrust of Plato's argument is not a passage to a different form of existence, but an escape from the deterioration of the physical world.

His call to "give me the stars" is not a search for a transformation but a release from the imprisonment of the body (Griffith 46). The "little god" (79) within Theon's breast, says Plato, does not wish to "stay/ To shiver on a frozen plain" (84) and is "weary of his mansion" (80), or his body, that is now betraying him. Death is therefore "a freedom of the mind" (86), perhaps a passage to an afterlife, but more likely, as Vitzthum has pointed out, a release from "the contradictions and confusions that a sensitive person necessarily perceives, as the entire poem has argued, in human existence" (53). The resignation to mortality Plato advises in the final two lines further erodes the suggestion of afterlife and confirms the point of view of "A Moral Thought"--the life Freneau "best esteems" is one that faces human transience and natural decay without the influence of Christian eschatology.

The theological musings of "Plato to Theon" evolve out of Freneau's paradoxical perceptions of a natural world that simultaneously nurtures and destroys. Approximately three weeks after the appearance of "Plato to Theon" another lyric appearing in The Freeman's Journal further explored the destructive side of nature and its theological implications. "Stanzas Occasioned by the Ruins of a Country Inn" examines the inexorable breakdown of the material world by turning a rustic inn into a symbol not only of physical decay but also of the impotence of both pagan and Christian

spiritualism in the face of eternal flux.

Freneau's selection of an inn as a symbol of material decay functions on several levels. Because the inn itself is associated with shelter and comfort for traveling strangers, it becomes, in its windblown ruins, an emblem of the futility of all efforts to shield humanity from the inevitability of decay and death. As a country inn, it also comes to represent once again the intellectual failure of pastoralism, this time as a defense against an entropic world. In language reminiscent of "The Farmer's Winter Evening," the poem presents a world lost to the destructive forces of time:

> In this the place where mirth and joy,
> Coy nymphs and sprightly lads were found?
> Alas, no more the nymphs are coy,
> No more the flowing bowls go round.
>
> Is this the place where festive song
> Deceiv'd the wintry hours away?
> No more the swains the tune prolong,
> No more the maidens join the lay. (21-28)

But more significant is the spiritual symbolism connected with the inn's destruction. Metaphors connecting the inn to religious elements appear several times in the poem. For example, numerous references compare the inn to sacred structures. In the opening stanza, the inn is

remembered as a "temple...to Bacchus" (2) that aspires high into the air; subsequently the inn is described twice as a church-like "dome" (5 and 42). Two additional metaphors contain veiled references to holy communion. The innkeeper's wife is described as a "Priestess of this ruined shrine" (9) who no longer presents her sacramental "ruddy wine" (11) to her guests, while references to the innkeeper as the "Host" suggest the consecrated wafer of the Eucharist. But none of these spiritual elements can withstand the forces of nature. The temple's dome is "by tempests torn" (5), the Priestess is "Unable to survive the stroke" (10) delivered by time, and the Host has "left at length his wonted stand" and no longer greets his guests.

The immediate point of these comparisons is to suggest the common fate of all parts of the material world:

> Old creeping time that brings decay
>
> Might yet have spar'd these mouldering walls,
>
> Alike beneath whose potent sway
>
> A temple or a tavern falls. (17-20)

But beyond this sense of all-enveloping entropy is Freneau's denial of the efficacy of spiritualism, whether it be pagan or Christian, both of which are suggested in the poem. Anticipating Shelley's "Ozymandias," Freneau sees no salvation, but only the results of nature's relentless destruction:

> Deep, unrelenting silence reigns;

Of all that pleased, that charm'd before
The tott'ring chimney scarce remains.
(38-40)

The final stanza speculates on the possibility of the dome's renewal, perhaps to be read as rebuilding, but also a potential reference to a Lucretian reconstitution of a material object wound down to its elements. If orthodox religion, "the roof that shelter'd us before" (44), falters under the scrutiny of empiricism and lies in symbolic ruins here, then an oblique reference to a philosopher who rejected the formal religion of his own day would indeed be appropriate.

Each of the three preceding poems represents a perceptible shift in Freneau's attitude toward nature. The natural world that the poet once saw as essentially benign, but with a darker threatening side, now appears to be primarily destructive, consuming both man and the earth indifferently, as if at "play," as Plato tells Theon. The fruits of sustenance are destroyed as quickly as they grow, the material fruits of human labor are wiped away in a moment, and the vitality of youth turns to pain and death. In the material world that Freneau sees, nature's "raree show" is truly a deception, so much so that he is compelled to question the existence of a supreme being and afterlife. In fact, as discord came to dominate Freneau's vision of nature, these issues began to take center stage in his work.

II. "Without a Partner, and Without a Guide"

In the two years following "Stanzas Occasioned by the Ruins of a Country Inn," Freneau produced very little lyric poetry, concentrating his energy on political and satiric verse. But the theological musings that began appearing in 1782 did not fade away, for in March 1784, again in the Freeman's Journal, Freneau returned to the question of soul and afterlife in "The Dying Indian," a dramatic monologue in which a stricken warrior examines the native American mythology of immortality and finds the evidence for it lacking. These doubts, however, extend to Christian eschatology as well, for by the end of the poem, Shalum becomes the mouthpiece for Freneau's own doubts about death and afterlife (Vitzthum 53). Shalum's picture of an Indian paradise from the outset lacks substance, taking on characteristics of classical literature's underworld. In place of the vigor and youth of the corporeal world, Shalum sees afterlife as "that shore/On whose bleak forests all the dead are cast" (3-4) and describes its inhabitants as "shades" (6) whose existence consists of "dull and dreary dreams" (9). The classical nature of Shalum's vision reflects Freneau's strong Latin background, which may have been a source of the poet's religious skepticism (Adkins 60), and removes the romantic aura of paradise that otherwise normally surrounds a conception of afterlife.

Such a melancholy image prompts Shalum to further

explore his vision, which he attempts to construct in the context of a corporeal world, with disappointing results:

> No deer along these gloomy forests stray,
> No huntsmen there take pleasure in the chace,
> But all are empty unsubstantial shades,
> That ramble through these visionary glades;
>
> (13-16)

Like the "cold pastoral" of Keats' Grecian urn, the world Shalum creates lacks the rich sensory pleasures of corporeal life. Even the fruits and foliage of these "gloomy forests" take on a sickly appearance; apples show "a consumptive visage" (20) and the hurtle-berry hangs withered on the vine. Shalum calls these images of afterlife "mischiefs" (22) played upon the dead by the same supreme power, whether nature or a godhead, that Freneau describes as playfully indifferent in "Plato to Theon." Such a world is so alien to Shalum that he characterizes himself as a stranger wandering in strange lands that bear no resemblance to the material reality to which he is accustomed. But this "picture in [his] boding mind" (26) will not disappear, for he cannot accept the "fine tales" of afterlife told by his culture without some form of concrete evidence:

> But when did ghost return his state to shew;
> Or who can shew that half the tale is true?
>
> (31-32)

Shalum's approach to the metaphysical questions of

death and afterlife is, of course, empirical, and it is this preference for the phenomenological universe that dominates his farewells in stanzas four and five. The unsubstantial character of the "visionary glades" of afterlife is contrasted with the concrete images of life in this world. Thus his emphasis on the "tall ascending woods" (38), "glassy lakes" (39), and "lofty swell" (47) of the mountains confirms his embrace of the physical world and reinforces the shadowy nature of the supernal world he expects to encounter. "Perplext with doubt" (51) though he is, Shalum nonetheless seeks a solution that would incorporate a future life into his materialistic point of view. Like Freneau's Plato, he considers a reincarnation of his physical being, postulating that his soul could some day return to the material world in another body or form:

> Nature at least these ruins may repair,
> When death's long dream is o'er, & she forgets to weep;
> Some real world once more may be assign'd,
> Some new born mansion for the immortal mind!--
>
> (53-56)

But qualifications dot his hopes of a renewed corporeal existence. His recurring use of "may" implies that these possibilities have no more substance than do the "fine tales" of afterlife he relates at the beginning of the poem (Griffith 73). Immediately after he muses on the possibility of renewal, he once again addresses the physical

world with a "farewell" that has echoed through several stanzas and asks his tribesmen to prepare his "hollow tomb" (61), a suggestion of the empty hopelessness of death. It is a world he must enter "without a partner, and without a guide" (66), Shalum concludes, for he finally can place no reliance on myths and stories that cannot be empirically proven.

When the poet/speaker intercedes and ends the poem with a reference to Shalum's "endless sleep" (68), Freneau sheds the poetic mask and takes on the dying warrior's theological doubts as his own. In this context, facing death "without a partner, and without a guide" becomes significant from a Christian perspective, for it questions the role of Christ as savior and foreshadows the absence of a pilot in several sea poems on death that Freneau would subsequently produce. Like Shalum, Freneau seeks proof of the Christian eschatology with an empirical eye free of illusion and optimism (Vitzthum 56), and his failure to find it generates his own lack of religious conviction.

Freneau's doubts about both the goodness of nature and the mythologies of death and survival of the soul would initiate far broader questions about the efficacy of a supreme being and the orderliness of the universe. The absence of any sense of natural or divine goodness and the specter of a finite, meaningless existence point toward a universe that is essentially random, where an indifferent

nature may harm one and bless another indiscriminately. Such a chaotic world is the subject of "Verses Made at Sea in a Heavy Gale," first published in the Freeman's Journal on April 13, 1785, and reprinted in the 1786 Poems of Philip Freneau before being retitled "The Hurricane" in subsequent collections.

The poem is an expression of humanity adrift in the universe as well as at sea, buffeted by the indifferent forces of nature and the spiritual emptiness of a world without order. To underline this disorder, the opening two stanzas contrast the safety humans and beasts find ashore during a storm and the life-threatening situation of the sailor/speaker who faces the full force of the same storm at sea. The happy man who is "safe on shore" (1) is protected by the tufted groves from the tempest at sea; thus in his self-centered safety he is "unmoved" (3), indifferent to what may be happening at sea. But the landsman on shore is blind to the chaos surrounding him, for the land acts only as a buffer, not as a counterbalancing force (Vitzthum, 60-62). His blissful ignorance may even be less secure than we initially realize. Just beyond the warmth and light of the man's home are the "haunts" (7) of the birds, the "hollow tree" (8) of the squirrels, and the "shaded caverns" (9) of the wolves, all of which can be found among the tufted groves that protect him from the force of the gale. The landsman's comfort may therefore be illusory, his

blissful state signifying the hollowness of ignorance (Griffith 81). But the sailor/speaker feels the full force of the storm on his "feeble barque" (6), perhaps symbolic of human inadequacy in the face of such natural violence, and in his isolation sees the rest of the world as "blest" (10). In the midst of his terror, the sailor begins to contemplate the uncertainties of death:

> While o'er the dark abyss we roam,
> Perhaps, whate'er the pilots say,
> We saw the Sun descend in gloom,
> No more to see his rising ray,
> But bury'd low, by far too deep,
> On coral beds, unpitied, sleep! (13-18)

The appearance of "pilots" echoes the absent guide that Shalum seeks at the end of "The Dying Indian" and once again signals a lack of guidance, especially spiritual, for the tone of "whate'er the pilots say" suggests that they are not taken seriously. The following four lines contain an interesting ambiguity: does the concluding couplet refer to "we" (the sailors) or the sun? In what would be a more logical reading, the sailors should be "bury'd low...[and] unpitied," but the reading of Vitzthum (61) and Griffith (80), that the <u>sun</u> is "bury'd low," is more compelling. Though the image is fantastic, the latter reading expresses death from the viewpoint of the sailor, which is wholly consistent with the speculations of the next stanza.

Furthermore, the burial of the sun symbolizes both the destruction of the corporeal world, leaving the sailor/speaker to grope with death in stanza four, and the death of the Christian Son who also drowns with no hope of a "rising ray" (Vitzthum 61).

The destruction of both the physical world and a Christ-like savior or godhead forces the sailor/speaker to view death as an intangible landfall, an "uncoasted strand" (19) that he can no longer fathom. Without a creed or philosophical model with which to interpret existence and death, the speaker has "no charts...to mark [the] land/ No compass to direct [the] way" (21-22) and once more laments the absence of a pilot or a "new Columbus" (24) to provide direction. Nor is he any more successful in facing the "lawless power" (26) of an indifferent nature that possesses none of the pleasures of pastoral romanticism:

> Of friendship's voice, I hear no sound,
> No comfort in this dreadful hour--
> What friendship can in tempests be,
> What comfort on this angry sea? (27-30)

As the sailor is left to battle the storm, the barque that was once accustomed to obeying a priori metaphysical and epistemological guidelines now "gropes her trackless way" (33) in a world that seems to lack all sense of order as mountains (of either water or rock), imposing images of solidarity and order, burst and fall away. In the face of

such uncertainty, the "skill and science" (35) of humanity must surely fail as it helplessly moves toward ruin.

The holocaust of this poem confirms the hopelessness of Shalum's "endless sleep," but while "The Dying Indian" begins and ends with the question of death and afterlife, "Verses Made at Sea" examines the chaotic vision that grows out of the absence of a religious or philosophic model. Like Shalum, the sailor/speaker of the latter work sees no promise of continuing existence beyond this material life, but more significant is the random violence of nature, now appearing more threatening than benevolent. Because Freneau has stripped away any vestige of a metaphysical system of belief that might explain the terror of nature, he is left with only the chaos of his sense perceptions. While the happy landsman rests comfortably, the wretched sailor faces death, a milieu seemingly without reason. "Verses Made at Sea" may be Freneau's darkest poem, but the disorder and despair born of his unbending empiricism would appear often over the next few years.

Freneau's nihilist vision of annihilation appeared again the following year in "The Wild Honey Suckle," a poem far different from "Verses Made at Sea" in both its setting, a quiet natural retreat, and its subject, a simple flower hidden from view. Yet the poet's return to a pastoral setting does not mean a return to romantic themes, for this poem's materialist vision views existence as decay and death

as complete annihilation. The opening stanza, describing a flower that is both untouched and unseen by sentient beings, suggests a world of unreal stasis, its negative qualities denying the finiteness associated with Lockean sensationalism (Arner 57).

> Fair flower, that dost so comely grow
> Hid in this dreary dark retreat,
> Untouch'd thy honey'd blossoms blow,
> Unseen thy little branches meet;
>
> No roving foot shall find thee here,
> No busy hand provoke a tear. (1-6)

That the flower is not subject to the "roving foot" and "busy hand" of perceiving humans isolates it from the material world. Nature itself nurtures the flower's static isolation by shielding it from heat with a "guardian shade" (9) and watering it with a "murmuring stream" (10). But its white color becomes symbolically ironic, representing both purity and death, as the speaker realizes that the honey suckle must fade according to the same laws that govern all of nature (Arner 57).

As the speaker begins to realize the flower's transience, he focuses on its corporeal qualities. He is "smit with [its] charms that must decay" (13) and now sees in it not ideal beauty but inexorable destruction:

> I grieve to see thy future doom--
> (They died--nor were those flowers less gay,

The flowers that did in Eden bloom)

Unpitying frosts, and autumn's power,

Shall leave no vestige of this flower!

(14-18)

The reference to the flowers of Eden supports the inevitability of decay, but it also signifies a cause-effect relationship between man and nature. Man's picking of a plant (the "busy hand" that provokes a tear in line six) caused the fall of man and nature by introducing death and the end of immortal beauty. The speaker thus becomes an Adam arriving in Eden, and his realization of decay and death represents his passing from innocence to knowledge, specifically the ravaging effect of time on the honey suckle (Arner 58).

With such knowledge, the speaker now sees the flower fixed in time, the ephemeral product of a transient world that quickly winds down to nothing:

From morning suns and evening dews

At first thy little being came--

If nothing once--you nothing lose,

For when you die you are the same--

The space between is but an hour,

The empty image of a flower. (19-24)

A dramatic indication of the flower's brevity, time contracts as the stanza unfolds, the space of a day becoming an hour and then nothing as the flower turns into an "empty

image." By the end of the poem, the speaker's point of view becomes nihilistic, for the emptiness of the flower is in fact its cosmic destiny. Because its origin and destination are the same cosmic void, its brief physical existence becomes meaningless, as life and death become indistinguishable parts of the cycle of nature (Vitzthum 89). The reference to Eden in stanza three now takes on additional significance, for humanity fell from immortality as well as nature and thus shares the nihilistic fate of all living things. Like the sailor in "Verses Made at Sea," the speaker of "The Wild Honey Suckle" can see no spiritual salvation beyond the material realities of decay and death.

As Freneau republished the poem in subsequent collections, he made several changes that affect its reading. For example, in the version appearing in the 1788 collection, the "dreary dark retreat" of line two becomes a "silent dull retreat," which emphasizes the unreality of the setting by placing this bright flower against a "dull" background (Arner 59). But most significant are the changes in the last line. The original 1786 version's "empty image" of a flower becomes "mere idea" in the 1788 collection and then "frail duration" in the 1795 collection. Both Vitzthum (88) and Griffith (143) see the revisions as an effort to soften the impact of the line, the first two versions suggesting a vacuous mental picture outside of reality and the last version emphasizing the flower's brief existence

in the corporeal world. But there is also a finer distinction to be made about the first two versions that may indicate a change in Freneau's thinking near the end of the 1780's. The "empty image" of 1786 implies a formlessness to the flower, as if an object that comes from nothing and returns to nothing has no reality of its own. Such a phrase could well express Freneau's disappointment in, if not growing distrust of, the stringent empirical approach he has brought to his poetry during the decade. The "mere idea" of 1788, though still suggesting a lack of concreteness, indicates that Freneau may at least concede a fleeting existence for material objects and that he has begun to accept, perhaps with a sense of resignation, the nihilism of a materialist vision.

Freneau's rejection of the spiritual world and immortality seems to have strengthened by the time "Lines Occasioned by a Visit to an Old Indian Burying Ground" (later titled "The Indian Burying Ground") appeared in the November 1787 issue of American Museum. At first reading, this poem seems a reprisal of the dramatic situation of "The Dying Indian," but the approaches of these two poems reflect a change in perspective. The dying Shalum conveys not only doubts about the theological system of his own culture but also the fear and uncertainty that such doubts create in his own tragic situation. The more distant speaker of "The Indian Burying Ground" views the Indian and Christian

eschatologies from a detached perspective; he is skeptical of both Indian and Christian beliefs, accepting the idea of a purely material existence that troubles Shalum so much. Naturally, because this speaker is not threatened with death, he can afford to be more analytic, but the very different positions of the two speakers also suggest that Freneau felt more certain, though not necessarily more comfortable, about the absence of a spiritual world in the later poem.

"The Indian Burying Ground" deals with the burial habits and supporting beliefs of an Indian culture, though the first stanza does away with the Christian eschatology immediately:

> In spite of all the learn'd have said
> I still my old opinion keep;
> The posture that we give the dead
> Points out the soul's eternal sleep. (1-4)

The supine position of Christian burial represents rest, not the activity suggested by the sitting position of Indian dead, and thus belies the attitudes of the "learned" clergymen of Christianity. The seated Indian, on the other hand, is placed in a position of action with his fellow dead who "share again the joyous feast" (8) of another life. His dressed venison and painted bowl signal preparation for a journey; his bent bow and bone-tipped arrows signify the activity to come, for though his earthly life is now over,

"the finer essence [is not] gone" (16).

But the fifth stanza, in asking visitors to the gravesite for reverence and understanding, actually challenges the hopefulness of primitive burial rites:

> Thou stranger, that shall come this way,
> No fraud upon the dead commit,
> Yet mark the swelling turf, and say,
> They do not lie, but here they sit.
>
> (17-20)

Some clever diction in this stanza indicates that Freneau does not revere the Indian attitude toward afterlife at all. There <u>is</u> fraud here, but it is the Indians who perpetrate it upon themselves, for though they may <u>sit</u> instead of <u>lie</u>, in the speaker's mind they are in fact lying to themselves through romantic fancy. The romanticism of the burial ground is enhanced by the decorated rock that rests at the site, where the visitor may see the "<u>fancies</u> of a ruder race" (24). That these drawings are considered "fancies" casts a shadow of skepticism over them, amplified by the fact that they are "wasted half by wearing rains" (23). This erosion is an implication of the superiority of the empirical world over the power of fancy and acts as a rejection of the faculty that encourages a self-deluding flight from reality (Vitzthum 105). It also acts as a further indication of the transience of the physical world. If the painting could survive to represent the stories it

depicts, then perhaps a belief in a future existence in another life could be sustained. Art is supposed to immortalize, but apparently all is transient in an entropic world (Griffith 157).

The speaker's attitude toward the images in this painting further attests to their diminished value as icons of spiritual belief. Much like the images on Keats' Grecian urn, the aged elm, the admiring shepherd, and the "restless Indian queen" (29) are all frozen in eternity, lacking the vitality of life. Perhaps even more subversive is the hunter who eternally pursues the deer, both of whom are nothing more than shades to the speaker. The emphasis on stasis is significant, for, as Martin Itzkowitz has noted, Freneau's locus of values in this poem lies within the observable phenomena of present experience. Because the nature of the soul is "Activity that wants no rest" (12), all action in the poem, except for the painting, surrounds the speaker's observation of the scene before him (260). Like Shalum, the speaker here demands sensory experiences in a world of sensation, but these drawings are merely images of afterlife, depictions of the stories Shalum knew and ultimately doubted. It is because they are so remote from reality that they "chide the man that lingers there" (32).

Further thwarting the intent of these drawings is the image of the spreading elm. As in "The Dying Elm," it

traditionally represents dreams and illusions, and its function here is to cast a shade of doubt over the other objects in the painting (Griffith 157). The elm is also "far projecting" because it emphasizes both the frame of fancy that surrounds the final four stanzas and the length and depth of the religious beliefs of human societies (Vitzthum 106).

But Freneau is no crusader here and admits that both Christian and Indian civilizations will yield to this cosmic mythology for a long time to come:

> And long shall tim'rous Fancy see
> The painted chief and pointed spear,
> And reason's self shall bow the knee
> To shadows and delusions here. (37-40)

The symbolic and ironic efforts to dismantle both the Indian and Christian notions of afterlife in this poem establish a conflict between reason and imagination in the final stanza that in the last line seems to favor reason. Freneau may ask an intruding stranger to respect Indian beliefs, and he may sense that reason "bow[s] the knee" to fancy out of ritual and convention, but the idea of immortality rests within the realm of "shadows and delusions." In that concluding phrase the poet declines to celebrate superstition but instead finds it harmless and reason superior because, for Freneau, reason is centered in the corporeal world (Vitzthum 106).

Throughout the poem, Freneau makes a sharp distinction between material objects and those of the imagination, for, as a demanding empiricist, he seeks proof of spiritual survival in the physical world. Thus the position of the dead and, in the Indian grave, the vestments and supplies included ironically comment on the veracity of afterlife while the painting on the rock, as an object of the imagination, fails to support spiritual beliefs. Itzkowitz, in his comparison of "The Indian Burying Ground" and "Ode on a Grecian Urn," sees this distinction as the key to the poem's attitude about supernal survival. In Keats, beauty and truth are permanent, and their permanence and identity are all that are necessary for the salvation of man. But in Freneau, there is no salvation, and only transience itself, in both man and the picture, endures. Focusing wholly on the present, Freneau makes no distinction between matter and spirit, without which there can be no triumph of the spirit (261).

Even though the conclusion of "The Indian Burying Ground" seems to vacillate between acceptance and rejection of the spiritual world,[2] the poem is probably Freneau's strongest denial of the supernal survival of the soul because it directly confronts cultural customs and symbols of death and afterlife. As in "The Dying Indian" and "Verses Made at Sea," Freneau seeks evidence within the corporeal world to support eschatological beliefs, but what

he finds, as he succinctly describes in "The Wild Honey Suckle," is the predominance of transience and death. The uncertainty of both Shalum and the ill-fated sailor/speaker becomes a growing conviction that existence begins and ends within the confines of a material world. But what drives Freneau's exploration of the existence of deity or soul is not what he perceives but what he does not. The hidden seaweed of "A Moral Thought," the fine tales for which Shalum can find no support, and the "uncoasted strand" of "Verses Made at Sea" all are in effect questions about our ability to perceive the material world or understand what we perceive. The accuracy of our perceptions is a concurrent theme in Freneau's poetry during this decade which both adds another dark thread to the entropic and spiritually empty visions the poet has woven and challenges the observations on which these visions are based.

III. Perception and Self-Deception

"The Lost Adventurer," which first appeared in the Columbian Herald on March 6, 1786, resembles "The Dying Indian" in its use of an unnamed narrator to open and close a poem that is otherwise dominated by an identified persona who relates misgivings about a philosophic dilemma he is facing. But otherwise these poems are far different in their approach. "The Dying Indian" relates deep but rather unsubtle doubts about afterlife, while "The Lost Adventurer" discusses in complex symbolic language the difficulty and

disappointments of acquiring knowledge empirically. The voyages of the seaman Ralph become symbolic of both the ugly realities of the empirical world and the fortitude required to face them. Eschewing the comfort of a pastoral landscape for the rigors and uncertainties of the ocean, Ralph can be viewed as representative of Freneau and his own empirical quests for a philosophic model in his art.

The poem opens with the speaker describing Ralph on "a sweet isle where winter never reigns," (2) mending sails and exclaiming that the pastoralism of this tropical island means nothing to him. Like the early Freneau, Ralph rejects the comfort of pastoral life as unreal, and the fact that he is mending sails indicates that he will soon leave the island and its pastoral romanticism for the reality of the sea. He then relates how he was first lured away from land to be a sailor, a tale that could also suggest Freneau's attraction to intellectual pursuits:

> 'With masts so trim, and sails as white as snow,
> 'The painted barque allur'd me from the land,
> 'Pleas'd, on her sea-boat decks I wish'd to go
> 'Mingling my labours with her hardy band;
> 'The Captain bade me for the voyage prepare
> 'And said, by Jasus, 'tis a grand affair!
>
> (7-12)

The barque can be viewed as intellectual or philosophic inquiry, described first as an attractive figure of purity

and then as a garish whore that "allur'd" him, the first indication that Ralph (and Freneau) has found not happiness but pain and disappointment. Ralph's willingness to be a part of the "hardy band" of sailors and the encouragement he receives from the Captain represent Freneau's desire to take up the difficult tasks of art and philosophic inquiry and the motivation he found in friends and mentors, such as a John Witherspoon.

The next two stanzas, which describe how the earliest ocean voyager might have been seduced by this island and simultaneously frightened by the threat of the sea, reinforce both the insularity and ignorance represented by pastoralism and the uncertainty and potential failure of taking unproven skills into a new and frightening arena. The seductive imagery Ralph uses to characterize the island is similar to that used by Freneau in past poems to discredit the pastoral world. The "gay groves" (14) and "charming shades" (15) of "Damon's cottage or Plaemon's fields" (18) represent the same intellectual indolence of "The American Village's" ideal island. Nonetheless these images of comfort and retirement seem attractive next to the threats portrayed in the following stanza, where Ralph wonders about abandoning the safety of land with a ship and a crew that has not been tested at sea:

'His barque, the bearer of a feeble crew
'How could he trust, when none had been to prove her-

'Courage might sink when lands and shores withdrew
'And sickly whelps might spoil the best manoeuvre.

(19-22)

Just as the crew's courage on land might disappear at sea when inexperience leads to error, Freneau is symbolically asking how he can trust his own intellectual skills and courage and realizes that the "sickly whelps" of doubt can question the interpretations of his observations. All he can rely on is the fortitude that "views bright skies and leaves the dark to fate" (24). In other words, just as the sailor must hope for better weather after a storm, the philosophic inquirer who has uncovered a discordant nature and a spiritually bankrupt existence must accept what he perceives, a theme that grows more common in Freneau's poetry during this decade.

But as the sham of the "painted barque" implies, Ralph's seafaring life and Freneau's philosophic search have become solitary and disappointing occupations. The "wintry worlds" (27) and "lonely waves far distant from the sun" (29) that make up Ralph's sea life suggest Freneau's intellectual isolation and distress over the material discord and spiritual vacuum he finds. It is therefore not surprising that Ralph's terrifying image of death at sea can be viewed as an expression of the poet's dark, nihilistic mood:

'On him no mourners in procession wait,

'Nor do the sisters of the grove complain,--
'Nor can I think on coral beds they sleep
'Who sink in storms, and mingle with the deep.
(33-36)

Furthermore, the sailor's fear that he will be "conquer'd by the loud, tempestuous main" (32) becomes an admission of confusion for Freneau, who concludes he cannot be sure what his sense impressions have told him:

'Tis folly all!--for who can truly tell
'What streams disturb the bosom of that main;
'What ugly fish in those dark climates dwell
'That feast on men--.... (37-40)

Aside from the chilling imagery of death at sea presented here, these lines express both an uncertainty and a foreboding about human knowledge that become central to the poem. Just beyond the reach of human knowledge, these dark streams that "disturb" the depths of the ocean and ugly fish that "feast" on men suggest that human existence may actually be even more grim than Freneau has thus far discovered.

In the face of the sea's physical and emotional dangers, Ralph's advice to the speaker is to stay home in the "quiet groves" (42) of his island paradise, another indication of Freneau's doubt about the empirical course he has taken. In fact, the unnamed speaker who reappears to conclude the poem is left in a neutral position on the

shore, the "magic...inchanting" (44) island of romantic imagination behind him and the sea before him, towards which he looks for the ship that has taken Ralph away apparently for the last time (Griffith 134-35). Ralph's uncertain fate and the black hue of his ship are further indications of epistemological doubt, but it is the speaker who summarizes the shortcomings of perception in the final line ("long have [I] looked, and still must look in vain"). Thus both the speaker and Ralph end up unsure of what they perceive and become representative of Freneau's epistemological reservations.

Most critics who have examined "The Lost Adventurer" see it as a symbolic rejection of complacency for the uncertain chance of self-discovery and knowledge.[3] Only Vitzthum has looked beyond the notion of the quest for a conclusion, stating that Ralph's contradictory praise for the pastoral island and his attraction toward the treacherous ocean indicate a nihilistic world view in the poet to which he refused to give in (68-70). The revisions Freneau made to the poem in the 1788 Miscellaneous Works would seem to support this view. Freneau expanded the first stanza into two stanzas with the insertion of six lines and added an additional stanza after these two to emphasize further the land's benevolence. In the added stanza, Ralph even insists that he did not wish to leave his pastoral world, fixing his life on "one poor valley" and "seeking

nothing that the world admires" (Miscellaneous Works 74-75, ll. 17-18) But there is also a subtle sense of ambiguity and unreality to these additional tropical descriptions. The profusion of vegetation appearing here establishes confusion and contradiction; sugar cane, plantains, and bananas are clearly tropical fruit, but the ivy and yellow pines that also appear belong to a more temperate climate. Further contradictions are implied in the "ash-color'd iris," (8; 1788 text) for iris in both Latin and Greek means "rainbow" (Griffith 126). The "dismal green" (7; 1788 text) of the night-shade and the china pinks overrun by the marigolds add to a sense of disarray. The 1788 text thus magnifies the inadequacy of a purely empirical approach and further emphasizes Ralph's (and Freneau's) role as a "lost adventurer."

Appearing three months later in The Poems of Philip Freneau, the poet's first collection, "The Vernal Ague" questions the validity of empirical perceptions more directly by examining how the philosophic disillusionment of empiricism has impaired the poet/speaker's ability to perceive and comprehend his surroundings. The speaker's blurred vision is apparent in the first two stanzas, which are marked by a shadowy landscape rife with images of darkness:

> Where the Blackbird roosts at night,
> In groves of half distinguish'd light,

Where the evening breezes sigh
Solitary, there stay I.

Close along the shaded stream,
Source of many a golden dream,
Where branchy cedars dim the day--
There I muse, and there I stray.

(Poems of Freneau 86-87, ll. 1-8)

The pastoral landscapes that once created a "golden dream" of the imagination are now the source of dark brooding. The sighing evening breeze and the ominous presence of the blackbird add to the darkness and create a mood of ambivalence (Griffith 88-89). Isolation and lethargy grow out of this darkness, as the speaker aimlessly strays about the scene in a state of dark meditation.

Ironically, the speaker broods in the midst of springtime renewal, which Freneau highlights with several verbal phrases: a "winding stream that glides along" (13), a "sloping" vale" (15), and a "murmuring...western gale" (16). He admits that the budding leaves and new blooms that used to please him no longer exist for him; all aspects of natural renewal, he suddenly bursts out, "Have lost their charms!--the blooms are gone!" (17) But the activity of nature that permeates the middle of the poem contradicts the speaker's listlessness, an indication that it is not the physical world that has changed but rather the speaker's

perceptions. The "darker aspect" of the trees is not actively created by the trees but by the speaker, just as the disgust he feels for the nearby stream is a projection of his state of mind, not the condition of the water. Appearances therefore are not deceiving because natural phenomena actively deceive but because humanity does not understand or want to understand what it perceives.

The speaker's apostrophe to "Restoring Nature" in the final stanza to renew "the features of the mind" (23) that will once again allow him to enjoy the beauties of nature may express a desire to return to the shallow delusions of imagination, but in his request is the concurrent realization of the futility of seeking legitimate knowledge of the physical world. The perceptions of nature he would once again experience will nonetheless fade from his mind, for though nature can restore certain elements of the world, humanity is not one of them. In this respect, "The Vernal Ague" provides no hope for the future; nature's seasons of renewal are not explicit proof of the goodness and wisdom of a supreme being revealed in nature but rather confirmation of the "endless winter" of annihilation. Here appearance can no longer be accepted as reality, and perhaps the ultimate chill is that there is no knowable reality, only delusion.

The elusiveness of epistemological certainty also arises in "Captain Jones' Invitation," which, like "The

Vernal Ague," first appears in the 1786 Poems of Freneau. But unlike its companion poem, it approaches the failures of perception not from the intrinsic shortcomings of the human mind but from the extrinsic flux of the material world, an approach similar to that used in "The Lost Adventurer." Using the now familiar dichotomy of land and sea, Freneau begins by contrasting a life of ignorance on land with the knowledge to be found in the realism of the ocean:

> Thou, who on some dark mountain's brow
> Hast toil'd thy life away till now,
> And often from that rugged steep
> Beheld the vast extended deep,
> Come from thy forest, and with me
> Learn what it is to go to sea.
>
> (Poems of Freneau 169, ll. 1-6)

Life on land is "toil'd" away in a dark barren existence, yet from the perspective of the landsman who is being addressed here, the "vast extended deep" of the sea suggests seductively the breadth and depth of the possibilities of experience. The expansiveness of the ocean is reiterated in line seven, where it is referred to as "endless plains" (7), and again in lines fifteen through seventeen, in which the sea and sky become one:

> Green seas shall only greet the eye,
> Those seas encircled by the sky,

Immense and deep---

In its emptiness, the sea takes on the characteristic of a huge blank canvas on which the flux of discord and calm will take place.

Even in the captain's invitation there is the suggestion that experience is made up of ceaseless change. In successive stanzas, he asks the landsman to "share the dangers of the sea" (12) and then to "view the wonders of the sea" (18), confirming his assertion that "realms of death intrude between" (10) the calmer moments of experience. The following six stanzas introduce a series of rapidly changing scenarios to illustrate the flux of material life. In the midst of an empty ocean, the captain begins, a "verdant isle" (23) may appear as an oasis, but it is a deception, like the glassy surface of calm water that hides "many a corpse...laid below" (28), a suggestion of the potential violence and discord that rests beneath the surface of calm. The reference to death breaks the calm of the ocean island and leads to the depiction of a sea battle, the violence and death of which are "but the custom of the sea" (36). The next two stanzas reiterate the dichotomy of calm and discord, the captain describing how a peaceful sea suddenly becomes the "broken surges" (38) of a storm that leaves the crew "[h]alf lost, half buried in the main" so that "[h]ope scarcely beams on life again" (41-42). In an echo of the strife of "Verses Made at Sea," he portrays

natural violence as all-enveloping yet also as deceptive as the sea's glassy calm:

> Above us storms distract the sky,
>
> Beneath us depths unfathom'd lie. (43-44)

Distractions and unfathomed depths cloud perception and suggest barriers to understanding; in fact, these rapidly changing scenes, shifting from serenity to discord and back again, represent the partial or incomplete perceptions of the physical world that inhibit human understanding. Freneau thus implies that the material world's eternal flux leaves humans uncertain that what they perceive is reliable. Even the storms that conclude this volatile catalog of sea changes must give way to calm once again.

But unlike "The Lost Adventurer" and "The Vernal Ague," this poem also possesses a reaction to both epistemological and cosmological uncertainty. In the final stanza the captain asks the landsman if he has

> ...courage to despise
>
> The various changes of the skies,
>
> To disregard the ocean's rage,
>
> Unmov'd when hostile ships engage. (55-58)

The captain demands here and at several other points in the poem that the landsman possess the stoic fortitude to accept human epistemological shortcomings and the discord of both nature and humanity, which manifests itself in humanity's fear of death (Vitzthum 82). The landsman is to "fear no

ill" (11) at the intrusion of death at sea, "scorn all fear" (35) at the sight of battle, and finally accept the notion that "only one frail plank" (48) stands between him and death. To "despise" the threats of the sea is to accept the confusion and danger of living and confront life without illusion (Vitzthum 85). "Captain Jones' Invitation" is but one of the examples of Freneau's stoic reaction to the natural discord, spiritual emptiness, and epistemological doubt born of his empiricism. Appearing during the latter half of the 1780's, these poems readily acknowledged both a nihilistic view of the world and a sense of impotence in the face of chaos that cannot be explained or rectified, but only endured.

IV. The Stoic Response

To say that Freneau's response to the revealed chaos of his empirical approach was stoic does not mean that he formally embraced the ancient Hellenistic philosophy, which sought to develop a system that subordinated individual man to the logos or law of nature. The ethical goal of the Stoics was to live by the benevolence and orderliness of the universe in order to discover apatheia, or spiritual peace and well-being. Their means of achieving this goal centered around four cardinal virtues: intelligence, bravery, justice, and self-control (Hallie 19-22). Of these four, bravery and self-control make up Freneau's stoic reaction to empirical chaos. That he did not fully embrace Stoic

philosophy, however, is evident in the lack of peace and well-being found in selected poems of the latter half of the 1780's.

A brief comparison of two previously discussed sea poems of this decade will point out the emergence of Freneau's stoic attitude. The doubt and confusion of "Verses Made at Sea in a Heavy Gale" is expressed in a tone of helpless fear. The absence of spiritual authority, symbolized by the powerless pilot, and the seeming dissolution of the material world lead the sailor/speaker to express an emotional cry of impending destruction, inevitable in spite of the skill and science of knowledge. "Captain Jones' Invitation" portrays the same chaotic world in terms of natural holocausts and political wars, yet the captain expresses not despair and fear but fortitude, implying his own ability to treat chaos with a sense of indifference. Courage surely predominates in the latter poem, but equally evident is the tone of self-control and confidence embedded in the captain but absent in the demoralized sailor. This is not to say that Freneau's disappointment in what he has found was not deep, for that too appears in these poems, but their conclusions nonetheless tend to express an acceptance of a disordered universe.

Additional evidence in the 1786 Poems of Freneau's emerging stoicism exists in the substantial revisions the

poet made to "The House of Night" and "The Beauties of Santa Cruz." The expanded version of "The House of Night," nearly twice as long as the original, rejects the earlier version's romantic preference for the imagination by rationally explaining the poem's fantastic and often disconnected events. For example, whereas in the 1779 version the speaker suddenly finds himself outside Death's house after his encounter with Death, the 1786 poem carefully explains how he leaves the house and walks into the woods. Furthermore, his ability to hear and see Death's dying moments from outside the House of Night, impossible in a realistic setting, is explained in a new stanza enclosed in brackets that tells how fancy gave the speaker's "enraptur'd soul/An eagle's eye, with keenest glance to see" (Poems of Freneau 101-23, ll. 445-46) the events in Death's chamber. Freneau goes so far as to denigrate fancy in the 1786 version, claiming that it "play'st [its] wild delusive part so well" (18) in creating the "poetic dreams...of a finer cast" (14).

These revisions reflect the influence of Freneau's empirical approach in their efforts to explain disjointed or fantastic passages of the 1779 poem. But the most significant alteration to "The House of Night" is its treatment of death itself. Freneau added a strong element of Christian moralism to the 1786 poem that appears in several revisions. He turns the "comely youth" who

ridicules Death in 1779 into the virtuous Cleon who tends to Death's suffering even though Death has just killed his wife. Most significant, however, is the description of afterlife at the conclusion of the poem as a "Paradise, the land of thy desire/ Existing always, always to be blest" (543-44). Cady (14), Vitzthum (76), and Griffith (35) have each called "The House of Night" a burlesque of Christian eschatology, and in light of the overwhelmingly nihilistic poetry Freneau was producing at this time, their assertion is undoubtedly correct. Furthermore, the stanzas preceding the "Christian" conclusion undermine the notion of afterlife by describing death in purely Lucretian terms:

> Hills sink to plains, and man returns to dust,
> That dust supports a reptile or a flower;
> Each changeful atom by some other nurs'd
> Takes some new form, to perish in an hour.
>
> (533-36)

In mocking Christian mythologies of death and afterlife by comparing them to the Lucretian notion of material decay, Freneau demands that humanity face its fate not with romantic fancy but with stoic realism.

The revised version of "The Beauties of Santa Cruz" does not reverse but instead strengthens its argument that subverts the romantic vision of natural benevolence. Freneau added a preface to the 1786 version, a pair of quatrains which define the tone of the poem by emphasizing

the delusive quality of pastoral romanticism:

> Sweet orange grove, the fairest of the isle,
> In thy soft shade luxuriously reclin'd
> Where, round my fragrant bed, the flowrets smile,
> In sweet delusions I deceive my mind.
>
> But Melancholy's glooms assail my breast,
> For potent nature reigns despotic here;--
> A Nation ruin'd, and a world oppress'd,
> Might rob the boldest Stoic of a tear.
>
> (Poems of Freneau 133)

The central image of this passage is that of the speaker reclined in indolence, remote from reality. But more significant to the poem is the idea of "potent nature" reigning despotic over the island, for it implies that the natural beauty of the island is a sham, hiding the harsh threats of nature and humanity behind a veneer of ease and pleasure. Illusion in nature is reinforced by the introduction of a new image in lines 257-76, the "Animal flower." A mysterious plant that closes when one tries to touch it, it is an emblem of the transient beauty that frustrates the search for pastoral escape (Eberwein 275). In addition, nature's violence is now amplified to stress nature's destructiveness; for example, the description of the hurricanes that rake across Santa Cruz is expanded to emphasize how the storm's waves devour the land. Eberwein

calls the accumulation of such additional detail Freneau's effort to picture a new Eden that has already fallen (274).

Unlike the 1779 poem, however, this speaker displays an overt willingness to leave the island and be a "stranger on the inhospitable main" (354). He admits that he originally was "Led [to Santa Cruz] by false hope, and expectation vain" (356), but he is now free of any illusions about nature's benevolence and is willing to face the sea and its severe realities (Vitzthum 79). Stanza 90, added to the 1786 poem, sums up the speaker's stoic attitude toward nature:

> There endless plains deject the wearied eye,
> And hostile winds incessant toil prepare;
> And should loud bellowing storms all art defy,
> The manly heart alone must conquer there.
>
> (357-60)

For Freneau, disorder and danger now represent reality; remaining among the pleasures of Santa Cruz only delays "the unwelcome task" of facing it.

The evolution of "Lines Written at the Pallisades, near Port Royal, in the Island of Jamaica" further reflects how Freneau grew to accept a chaotic existence. The poem exists in two versions, the original published in the Columbian Herald on February 2, 1786, with a substantially revised version appearing in the 1788 collection, The Miscellaneous Works of Philip Freneau. The original poem compares the

ruins of Port Royal, destroyed by an earthquake in June 1692, with its former grandeur and uses the comparison as a paradigm of the inevitable decay of the material world. Near the beginning of the poem, Freneau establishes the city's one-time greatness, a place where "toils bade wealth's gay structures rise,/ And commerce swell'd that glory to the skies" (7-8). A footnote Freneau included with the 1788 version describes a city of 1500 buildings, but even a sizable metropolis like Port Royal is no match for the powers of nature:

> Here opening gulphs confess'd the Almighty hand,
> Here, the dark ocean roll'd across the land;
> Here, domes on domes a moment tore away--
> Here, crowds on crowds in mingled ruin lay,
> Whom fate scarce gave to end their noon-day feast,
> Or time to call the sexton or the priest.
>
> (17-22)

Port Royal is destroyed in "a moment," like the fantasy island in "The American Village," by a power seemingly indifferent to the fate of the city or its inhabitants. Yet the result here is not merely a lost dream but a transformed civilization. While Port Royal has been physically reduced to "a spit of sand...[a]nd mouldering mounds" (33-34), its society has fared no better. The "sprightly lads, [and] gay, bewitching maids" (35) that once populated the city have been replaced with "worn-out slaves" (43), political

outcasts, and idle descendants with murderous demeanors. Even the city's institutions are falling apart; the church no longer has a priest, and its unused entrance is overgrown with grass.

Lingering behind this description of a decaying civilization, however, is the speaker, whom we can confidently identify as Freneau. The opening four lines of the poem focus not on the city but on the speaker, who clearly has come to Port Royal in search of something:

> Here, by the margin of the murmuring main,
> While her proud remnants I explore in vain,
> Though abject now, Port Royal claims a sigh,
> Nor shall the muse the unenvied gift deny.
>
> (1-4)

What the speaker has been vainly seeking among the city's ruins is an answer to the inevitability of material decay and destruction, an answer he obviously has not found. The sigh he exhales reflects his low spirits, for the phrase "Though abject now," in its ambiguous position, applies as much to the speaker as it does to Port Royal. He has come to the city like an archeologist, exploring the "remnants" in an effort to "find some reliques in this sink of fame" (46), only to discover that the search was worthless. What has been left standing, he concludes, will be subject to "guns, fires,...earthquakes" (47) or whatever forces that must ultimately destroy the physical world. His discovery

of the irresistible force of decay is the "unenvied gift" of his muse and leads him to burst out in despair:

> Where shall I go, what Lethe shall I find,
> To drink these dark ideas from my mind!--
>
> (49-50)

The tone of resignation that permeates the rest of the poem here turns to spiritual anguish, the depth of which is uncommon in most of Freneau's poetry (Vitzthum 65). The emotion displayed here is somewhat reminiscent of Shalum in "The Dying Indian" or the sailor/speaker of "Verses Made at Sea" and is, of course, not a trademark of a stoic point of view.

But the revised 1788 version of "Port Royal" balances despair with a strengthened sense of resigned acceptance through the addition of several lines at the end of the poem. The latter version closely resembles the original through the speaker's outburst of despair, but afterwards Freneau replaces the conclusion with a brief story of a lover's betrayal and a concluding acknowledgement of the inevitability of decay. The story of the abandoned woman may add to the picture of Port Royal's declining social and moral fabric, but it is the speaker's assertion to the woman that "life is a dream" (Miscellaneous Works 176-79, l. 101) and must also submit to dissolution that lends the passage its significance and leads to the twelve-line conclusion. In a farewell to Port Royal, Freneau more calmly accepts the

chaos of transience:

> Where Nature still the toils of art transcends--
> In this dull spot the fine delusion ends,
> Where burning sands are borne by every blast
> And these mean fabrics still bewail the past,
> Where want, and death, and care, and grief reside
> And threatening moons advance the imperious tide.
>
> (105-110)

Having seen the inescapable force of natural decay everywhere, the speaker now acknowledges the end of "the fine delusion" of permanence and order in the physical world. The indifferent tide of natural destruction is indeed "imperious" to all, and Port Royal becomes a symbol of a universe winding down to chaos. The final four lines emphasize the stoic tone of the speaker's conclusion, for the speaker resolves to quit the island once again for the realistic dangers of the sea "without a sigh" (114). Whatever bitterness and despair the poem expresses is now mitigated by the resigned tone of the concluding sixteen lines, as well as by the steady rhythm and conventional diction of its heroic couplets (Vitzthum 116).

Freneau's most emphatic statement of stoic resignation, however, appeared before the revised "Port Royal" was published. "The Departure," which first appeared in the Freeman's Journal on April 18, 1787, in many respects summarizes the discouraging epistemological and teleological

conclusions the poet has drawn during the 1780's and serves as his ultimate rejection of romantic delusion. The poem begins with the speaker's ironic declaration to seek another tropical island in an effort to regain a romantic vision:

> From Hudson's cold, congealing streams
> As winter comes, I take my way
> Where other suns prompt other dreams,
> And shades less willing to decay
> Beget new raptures in the heart,
> Bid spleen's dejective crew depart,
> And wake the sprightly lay. (1-7)

The "cold, congealing streams" of reality have brought with them a paralysis that the speaker would like to overcome with a return to a romantic world without transience and death, a world that might also inspire lighter verse than he has recently produced. But this stanza is Freneau's "straw man" argument, for the rest of the poem explains why such a return is now impossible.

Freneau' uncompromising vision in "The Departure" is filled with chaos and dissolution. His belief in a benevolent nature gone, he refers to the calm seas on which he embarks as "rage asleep, or madness chain'd" (9), implying that violence always lurks below the surface. In fact, he considers violence to be nature's normal state; tranquil waters, he states, must be "by dreams amus'd or love beguiled" (10). As he turns to the shore he is

leaving, his descriptions are dominated by expressions of decline:

> Sunk is the sun from yonder hill:
> The busy day is past;
> The breeze decays, and all is still,
> As all shall be at last;
> The murmuring on the distant shore,
> The dying wave is all I hear;
> The yellow fields now disappear,
> No painted butterflies are near,
> And laughing folly plagues no more. (20-28)

Everything in this scene is winding down to the nothingness to which the material world descends, the emptiness of the ocean suggesting how "all will be at last" (Vitzthum 92). Furthermore, the absence of "painted butterflies" and "laughing folly," symbols of romantic delusion, indicates the speaker's willingness to confront his fate. The next two stanzas present a catalogue of cyclical dissolution and death, as if to encapsulate all the deceptions of nature Freneau has cited in such poems as "The Vernal Ague" and "The Beauties of Santa Cruz." The desolate forests with their "short liv'd verdure" (38) exemplify the "fairy prospects" (34) now faded away. Once again reality is not knowable because the surface appearance is false (Griffith 120). All existence, he concludes, is "but drest/ Sad mourners for the funeral bell" (49-50).

Despite the decay and deceptions of the shore, however, the sea offers no happy alternative. As he raises his sail to head out to sea, the speaker faces the chaos of reality and asks "what does all this folly mean?" (53), only to answer by questioning his own reservations about confronting the disorder the sea represents:

> Why grieve to pass the wat'ry scene--?
> Is happiness to <u>place</u> confined--?
> No--planted also in the mind,
> She makes an <u>Eden</u> where she will. (54-57)

The reference to Eden in this version is probably an ironic reference to the human tendency toward romantic delusion that Freneau consistently denied during the 1780's (Vitzthum 93), but the revised version published in the 1788 <u>Miscellaneous Works</u> (163-65) stresses not the desire for happiness but the necessity of stoic courage:

> Is fortitude to heaven confined--?
> No--planted also in the mind
> She smooths the ocean when she will. (56-58)

Lovelock claims that such a revision suggests Freneau was still fighting off romantic fancy even this late in the 1780's (107), but it is more likely that the poet wished to clarify his assertion that grit and resolution, not romantic illusion, would "smooth the ocean" of discord and thus make the speaker's apprehensions appear as "folly."

The following stanza returns to the trials that

humanity must face, stating abruptly that "man must groan" (58), though now, instead of death and chaos, the culprits are such social ills as malice, indifference, slander, cowardice, pride, and servility. Referring once more to romantic attitudes, the speaker notes that such evils did not "haunt the human breast" (72) in Eden but then quickly adds that the world that contained such innocence has vanished forever, a reflection of Freneau's hard-nosed realism. In the concluding stanza the speaker asks if such a world can be rediscovered, either in this life or the next:

> What season shall restore that scene
> When all was calm, and all serene,
> And Happiness no empty sound,
> The golden age that pleas'd so well--?
> The mind that made it shall not tell
> To those on life's uncertain road;
> Where, lost in folly's idle round,
> And seeking what shall ne'er be found,
> We press to one abode. (77-85)

The frequent references in this poem to Eden and a "golden age" of innocence serve as foils to the chaos and decay of the real world as Freneau sees it. But there is now little hope of recapturing that earlier world, whether in reality or in the mind of the poet. The supreme being, "the mind that made" those days of paradise, is now apparently too

remote from humanity to inspire a return to a golden age, while human efforts to find happiness through romantic illusions cannot mask the inevitability of death. This is the milieu in which humanity finds itself and to which Freneau now casts a cold eye of tolerance.

"The Departure" is perhaps Freneau's most comprehensive expression of pessimistic realism during the 1780's. It views nature as uncertain and threatening, human perception as inadequate, and mythology and religion as illusive in the context of human transience. Vitzthum has called the poem a "departure from delusion concerning life to realism concerning death; from orthodox habits of mind to unorthodox speculation" (95), and as such it represents the poet's final break from the romanticism of his youth.

Freneau's brand of stoicism found its way into several other poems of lesser note from mid 1787 up to the publication of the 1788 Miscellaneous Works. Disorder of the social kind is the subject of "Address to Misfortune," published in the Freeman's Journal three months after "The Departure." Here Freneau darkly describes misfortune as the fate of almost every human endeavor, the hopes of success or happiness always yielding to sad experience. But he then concludes that such experience teaches humanity fortitude, for the "skies that fret, and storms that rave/ Alone can teach us to be brave" (21-22). Freneau returns to the deceptive cycles of nature in "The Man of Ninety,"

which first appeared in the Miscellaneous Works, only now instead of lamenting the meaninglessness to humanity of natural renewal as he does in "The Vernal Ague," the poet finds the strength to accept humanity's relative transience. The aging speaker of the poem notes how both he and his favorite oak tree have weathered the hostility of nature throughout their lives, but now he sees that the tree will regenerate for many more years while he is on the verge of death. It is a fate he faces without distress, comparing human existence not to the cycle of nature but that of the sun, which must have both a noon and a night.

The stoic tolerance these poems voice, however, is interrupted by a different point of view, for Freneau could not accept nihilism and disorder as an answer to the human condition. Appearing with "The Departure" in the same issue of the Freeman's Journal, "May to April" embraces the same stoic observations about dissolution and death discussed in "The Departure," yet it also subtly suggests the beginning of a teleological solution to a chaotic universe by acknowledging the necessity of decay to the continuation of life. In an apostrophe to April, a personified May argues that it owes its own beauty to the natural cycle of growth and decay that occurs beforehand. The stoic language of dissolution and death found in "The Departure" colors the argument here. May owes its shade to "April dead" (13), the prior month's "decay" (7) making room for late spring growth

before May yields its own "sweets" to the "torrid suns" (12) of summer.

But instead of disparaging nature's deception, Freneau cites the benefits of beauty turning to death and the potential disaster that can occur if the cycle is interrupted:

Without your showers
I breed no flowers,
Each field a barren waste appears;
If you don't weep
My blossoms sleep,
They take such pleasure in your tears. (1-6)

Freneau highlights the tension between death and the continuing life to which it contributes through the metaphoric comparison of rain to tears in lines four and six. The last line of the stanza possesses a cruel tone, but the proximity of "pleasure" and "tears" points out how May's flowering depends on April's decay, without which nature would be a "barren waste." The cycle, of course, is neverending; while admitting that it owes its own beauty to April's dead, May acknowledges that it too must "close the triumphs" (18) of spring and give way to summer.

The final stanza summarizes death's ironic role in sustaining life:

Thus, to repose
All nature goes;

Month after month must find its doom--

Time on the wing,

May ends the spring

And summer--triumphs o'er her tomb! (19-24)

Like the last line of stanza one, the final line of the poem possesses a seemingly cruel tone, emphasizing excitement and delight at the death that has preceded new life. The use of "triumphs" to characterize the succession of summer can be viewed as a sardonic reaction growing out of the poet's hardened point of view. But the emergence of new life has become Freneau's explanation or justification for what has appeared to be meaningless decay, and, despite the absence of any references to atomic theory, the Lucretian spirit that has appeared in many of his previous poems is perhaps more complete here in emphasizing renewal out of dissolution. As the poem reappeared in future collections, Freneau softened the last line as he moved farther away from a stoic attitude. The version appearing in the 1788 Miscellaneous Works drops the dash and substitutes "frolics" for "triumphs"; for the 1795 version, "frolics" is changed to "dances." Each change tempers the harshness of the line and thereby accents the relationship between death and the cycles of life.

"May to April" possesses some of the innocuous innocence that characterizes some of William Blake's Songs of Innocence, but, like Blake's lyrics, its simple but

subtle use of language calls attention to its subject, here the relationship between decay and renewal. Even the selection of the months May and April contributes to meaning, for the title itself symbolizes the disintegration of beauty and the resulting maintenance of nature's fertility. Griffith has pointed out that May was taken from the Roman deity "Maia," a goddess of fertility associated with spring, whereas April refers to Aphrodite, the goddess of beauty who is also associated with fertility (149).

But more significant is the poem's appearance amidst some of Freneau's darkest observations about the disorder and transience that plague human existence. "May to April" suggests that Freneau was still seeking answers to the questions his empirical approach to the material world had raised even as his stoic attitudes were gathering strength. The darker tones of the revisions to "The Departure" and "Port Royal," appearing almost a year after "May to April," indicate that the search for order was an arduous one, but the publication of the Miscellaneous Works of Philip Freneau in 1788, despite the resigned indifference in much of its content, would nonetheless mark a turning point in Freneau's philosophic evolution.

Endnotes

[1] See Leary in That Rascal Freneau (pp. 86-128) for a detailed discussion of Freneau's association with The Freeman's Journal. Although his role as editor apparently ended near

the end of 1782, Freneau contributed regularly to the paper until 1784.

[2] Critical opinion concerning Freneau's position about afterlife in "The Indian Burying Ground" is not unanimous. George Wasserman in "Freneau's 'The Indian Burial Ground'," Explicator, XX (January 1962), item 43, argues that Freneau does not embrace either rational rejection of afterlife or fanciful acceptance. He contends that first five stanzas constitute an a priori argument in favor of immortality, arguing that the "learned" are atheists and subtle schoolmen who deny immortality rationally and that the Indians' preparation for "an activity that knows no rest" implies the poet's opinion--it "Bespeaks the nature of the soul." On the other hand, the imaginative visions of life after death on the painted rock are nonetheless "shadows and delusions" and the fancy that created them "timorous." Wasserman concludes that Freneau's view of any biased pronouncement of the soul was skeptical and that the poet's position was intellectual humility and his target intellectual arrogance. Harry Campbell in "A Note on Freneau's 'The Indian Burial Ground'," Modern Language Notes, 68 (1953), 551-52, sees Freneau's "old opinion" about the position of the dead not as a denial but a clarification of an orthodox religious tenet. He finds that Freneau's opinion about the supine position of the dead suggesting "eternal sleep" points out the error of the "learned" who feel the prone position allows the body to sleep until the Resurrection. The active afterlife implied by Indian burial customs, however, is what Freneau embraces as a more accurate depiction of life after death.

[3] Both Emory Elliott (158-59) and J. Jeffrey Griffith (126-31) describe Ralph's voyages as quests of "self-discovery," Griffith adding that Ralph's ultimate failure to return stresses the uniqueness of each person's quest. Frank Lovelock (98) calls such self-discovery the necessary experience required to understand a hostile universe.

CHAPTER 4: THE SEARCH FOR ORDER

The publication of The Miscellaneous Works of Mr. Philip Freneau in April 1788 represented both the most significant expression of Freneau's vision of chaos and a turning point in his philosophic evolution. In many respects, the collection is as somber and pessimistic as Vitzthum describes it (110), particularly because of the inclusion of poems such as "The Wild Honey Suckle," "The Indian Burying Ground," and the revised versions of "The Departure" and "Port Royal." But the Miscellaneous Works also reflects Freneau's initial efforts to revise and eventually overturn the nihilism he had developed through the empirical approach of his poetry during the 1780's. The products of empiricism, including epistemological confusion, natural and social disorder, and spiritual doubt, that dominate the poems of the 1780's were reactions to passive perceptions of the material world that pictured the individual as helpless against the chaos of corporeal life. But what begins to appear in the 1788 collection and continues in several poems published up to the mid 1790's is the foundation of Freneau's response to the nihilistic point of view and stoic attitude that had evolved out of his empirical approach.

Three characteristics mark Freneau's work during this period. First, there is a shift in emphasis from passive

observation of a chaotic material world to active intellectual participation in that world to discover or create order amidst chaos. Thus the sailor of "Verses Made at Sea," who watches the mayhem around him and contemplates the philosophic chaos it represents, gives way to a Columbus, who seeks to prove through investigation and discovery that the earth does possess a balanced design, or to the mythic Jason, who fights for survival amidst the turmoil of the sea instead of giving in to it. Second, several of the more overtly philosophic works begin to apply a priori suppositions to the positions they express, a departure from the Lockean "tabula rasa" approach Freneau had used through much of the 1780's. Most notable are the emergence of the vague conception of a supreme being as the creative center of the universe and the assumption that humanity possesses limitations of perception and consequently incomplete knowledge of the physical world. Both of these notions would play a major role in the evolution of Freneau's deistic philosophies after 1800. Finally, perhaps a ramification of the poet's acknowledgement of humanity's limited knowledge, a sense of compromise concerning the darker sides of nature and humanity begins to appear, an indication that Freneau was more willing to accept natural threats and human foibles as necessary elements of a larger design.

Freneau's pessimism, however, did not disappear

completely with the publication of the Miscellaneous Works; within two major poems first appearing in this collection, "The Pictures of Columbus" and "The Hermit of Saba," are numerous images of natural disorder and human maliciousness. But because Freneau recognized the power of human intellect to effect change in "The Pictures of Columbus," the two poems together contrast the positive intellectual involvement of Columbus with the destructiveness of the hermit's passive withdrawal from the world.

The figure of Columbus appears in Freneau's work as early as 1779 in "Columbus to Ferdinand," in which the explorer displays a similar intellectual curiosity about the possibility of undiscovered lands, yet in that poem the emphasis is on the necessity of empirical observation to support a speculation. "The Pictures of Columbus" stresses the same interrelationship between imagination and empiricism, but the far greater detail of these eighteen "pictures" also allows Freneau to examine Columbus' conception of a symmetrical world and his effort to imagine and prove that order can be found in disorder.

In the first picture, Columbus immediately sees disproportion in the maps accepted as representations of the world's land masses, calling these maps "[b]lunders that Nature never made" (Miscellaneous Works 1, l. 4). He begins to speculate about the possibility of "sylvan worlds that Nature meant/ To balance Asia's vast extent," (18-19) and,

with the help of fancy, draws a potential new land mass on the map between Europe and Asia. Columbus, as a map "maker" or creator, thus takes the limited perceptions represented by the current maps and applies imaginative speculation to them. But he is also aware that imagination alone is incomplete; he knows that "these idle charts" (32) he has drawn are of no importance unless he can sail "o'er real seas" (33) and find empirical proof for his suppositions. However, he finds he must first refine his idea, for which he turns to an Inchantress, a further embodiment of his imaginative faculty, in pictures II and III. By gazing into her mirror, he turns his idea into a vision of discovery that concludes with his landing on a tropical paradise. His presupposition about a balanced world and his mirror gazing create a vision that he is now compelled to pursue.

Fired by his imagination, Columbus argues for financial support with both Ferdinand and Isabella in pictures IV through VII. He appeals to King Ferdinand's intellect by again citing his presupposition of symmetry and order:

> If all the surface of this mighty round
> Be one wide ocean of unfathom'd depth
> Bounding the little space already known,
> Nature must have forgot her wonted wit
> And made a monstrous havock of proportion.
>
> (IV, 26-30)

His argument that there is more to the earth than what we

see before us reflects a belief in the limits of passive human perception. What we cannot readily perceive and understand on the surface we must seek out with reason and speculation, backed by further observation:

> Platonic dreams, and reason's plainer page
> All point at something that we ought to see
> Buried behind the waters of the west,
> Clouded with the shadows of uncertainty.
>
> (IV, 39-42)

The only path out of "the shadows of uncertainty" is the use of an aggressive intellect that will seek answers, and Columbus has become the very symbol of that intellect.

But there is also a darker side to "The Pictures of Columbus" that will eventually overwhelm the poem, and its emergence can be traced to Columbus' discussion of his proposal with Queen Isabella. Here Columbus becomes manipulative, not arguing from historic truths or reason's laws, but fanatically using any means available to gain his ends (Bowden 36). His arguments to the Queen are laced not with reason but with appeals to pride, power, and avarice. Not only does Columbus promise "abounding wealth reserv'd for Spain" (VI, 20), he also persuades Isabella that she would win for the world a new Eden, reclaimed from "the errors that woman made" (VI, 34). Despite the ridicule of Columbus' plan she has heard from the learned and the clergy, his appeal to the social vices that contribute to

the dark vision of "The Departure" successfully turn Isabella's head.

The darker side of the poem expands in pictures VIII through XIII, depicting both the opposing arguments to Columbus' active intellect and its ultimate obstacle, the chaotic reality of nature. As a challenger of the views of the intellectual establishment, views based on scholastic dogma, Columbus realizes he is considered a subversive and an infidel:

> The world, and all its wisdom is against me;
> The dreams of priests; philosophy in chains;
> False learning swoln with self-sufficiency;
> Men seated at the helm of royalty
> Reasoning like schoolboys.
>
> (VIII, 18-22)

In their torpid scholastic inactivity, the intellectual and religious communities become foils to Columbus. The Spanish friar Bernardo cites his holy book's authority in refuting Columbus' theories that the earth is round and contains new, undiscovered lands and calls Columbus a heretic. Orosio the mathematician recalls the legends of the edge of the earth, populated with "red serpents, fiery forms, and yellow hags" (XI, 24) in "such a wasteful ebullition/ That never island green, or continent" (XI, 30-31) could exist. Both Bernardo and Orosio will not venture far from the authority of tradition and therefore fear anyone with the courage to take

bold intellectual steps. The noblemen whom Columbus would like to take on as crewmen are equally timid, for they prefer to "revel in the shade/ Of painted ceilings" (XII, 9-10), an indication of their own intellectual passiveness.

Picture XIII, however, recreates Columbus' greatest challenge, the voyage itself and the rebellion of his crew. This passage expresses the same ambivalence about the ocean that appears in Freneau's best sea poetry (Vitzthum 112), at one point recalling the anguish of "Verses Made at Sea" as the sailor Antonio sees the world turning to disarray:

> See, Nature's self prepares to leave us here;
> The needle, once so faithful to the pole,
> Now quits his object and bewilders us;
> Steering at random, just as chance directs--
>
> (XIII, 12-15)

Another sailor is fearful of the "new stars ascending, never viewed before" (XIII, 17) and wishes he had never left the "clear springs and shady groves" (XIII, 19) that symbolize the lethargic intellectual comfort of land. But Columbus remains firm as the aggressive intellect, claiming that "man/Is nature's lord, and wields her to his will" (XIII, 23-24). In fact, he feels that his vision in the Inchantress' mirror is confirmed, for all of the trials on land and at sea prove that "the witch's glass was not delusion" (XIII, 67). Ultimately, it is the strength of his convictions that convinces the crew to continue.

The climax of "The Picture of Columbus" occurs in picture XIV, "Columbus at Cat Island," where the explorer's imagined vision becomes reality. It is also the poem's darkest moment, for it presents a world that disintegrates immediately and concomitantly with the act of discovery (Kyle 67). Just as Columbus offers the island to God, one of his crew kills an Indian for his gold earrings. Later, as Columbus reflects on the "sylvan scenes of innocence and ease" (XIV, 40) and the unsullied purity of nature, he discovers the murdered Indian and the loss of innocence in the New World:

> Is this the fruit of my discovery!
> If the first scene is murder, what shall follow
> But havock, slaughter, chains and devastation
> In every dress and form of cruelty!
>
> (XIV, 56-59)

Columbus' intellectual boldness is now clearly two-sided: his discovery is the starting point of the civilization and growth of a hitherto unknown America, but it is also the beginning of the European corruption of the New World.

Carol Kyle refers to the rest of the poem as the "terrible" pictures that highlight the rapid destruction of Columbus and his dream and the essentially tragic view of human existence that Freneau continues to hold (67). Though his initial return to Spain is triumphant, his glory is deceptive, for he is politically betrayed in picture XVII

and returned to Spain in chains after his third voyage. The eighteenth and final picture, "Columbus at Valladolid," summarizes the pessimism Freneau continues to feel about the delusion and transience of existence, as Columbus looks back on his life:

> To snatch existence from this scanty soil,
> Were these the hopes deceitful fancy bred;
> And were her painted pageants nothing more
> Than this life's phantoms by delusion led?
>
> (XVIII, 3-6)

However, Columbus also distinguishes between the "deceitful fancy" that suggested visions of personal gain and glory and the "golden fancy" that provokes future pictures of a rising American republic (Vitzthum 112). Freneau's contrasting conclusions about the visions of fancy mark a revision about the usefulness of imagination. Fancy supported by empirical proof, the "golden fancy" that led to the discovery of America, becomes a legitimate tool of the voyager-wanderer who comes to symbolize the active intellect that has changed the world and proven superior to passive observation.

Columbus ends up a victim of the discord created by the social ills of humanity, but while the hermit of "The Hermit of Saba" suffers a similar fate, he contributes to his own destruction by withdrawing from the world and becoming unavailable to new experiences and knowledge. As an isolated passive observer, he thus places himself in

opposition to the aggressive Columbus, the seeker of knowledge, a contrast that enhances the image of the active intellect. Unlike the explorer who is willing to face the challenge of nature, the hermit views the violence of the sea from the safety of his island with a sense of alarm at its ferocity. He fears that the force of the storm could wipe out the island and prove "at once the world's mortality" (Miscellaneous Works 30-38, l. 9), so he begins to retreat to his cavern rather than face the turmoil of the sea. When he sees a barque rushing toward the island in a sea swell, his intimidation in the face of nature grows. "Man is too weak to combat the power/Of these mad elements, that conquer all" (28-29), he observes. Once the barque is destroyed, the image of the three mariners clinging to the bare rocks as the waves beat upon them summarizes his attitude of impotence.

The hermit also expresses a smug attitude about the retired life he has created on the island. After he has brought the three mariners to his hillside cavern, he tells his guests how he frequently watches naval battles whose "object [is] avarice half, and half ambition" (137) and goes on to state that he possesses what these fleets fight over:

> That phantom I have here which they pursue,
> Grasping it, miser-like, in my embraces--
> The stream distilling from the shaded cliff,
> And fruits mature from trees by nature planted,

And contemplation, heaven born contemplation!
These are my riches! I am wealthier far
Than Spain's proud fleets.... (140-146)

The riches of a simple, natural life are obviously cited here in language reminiscent of "The Beauties of Santa Cruz," but the mariners hear only the metaphoric comparison to the wealth of the Spanish fleet, take it literally, and plot to kill the hermit for his non-existent treasure.

The rest of the poem comprises a series of self-deceptions. The mariners, having already deceived themselves about the hermit's wealth, take on the superior attitude of civilized men who regard the hermit as a "savage offspring of the isle" (153) or a supernatural creation of "mingled heat and moisture" (155). Arguing from a narrow commercial point of view, they see his wealth as wasted, for he "builds no ships, employs no mariners" (190) or otherwise employs his money for useful ends. Their feelings of superiority override any sense of moral turpitude, and so they justify the murder they commit. But it is the hermit's self-deception that is symbolically more serious. By becoming a passive recluse, the hermit rejects the knowledge of experience and takes on a benign romantic attitude born of his pastoral surroundings. As a result he leaves himself open to the depravity of seafarers who have become hardened by their exposure to the tumultuous waters of experience. As has occurred so often in Freneau's poems, the passive

romantic image becomes an illusion when it collides with the reality of experience. The hermit's failure thus throws Columbus' tragedy in relief; both are destroyed in their efforts to find a solution to the discord of existence, but Columbus' more aggressive effort to create order appears more heroic and will become a prominent theme in Freneau's work after 1788.

This thematic polarity between "The Pictures of Columbus" and "The Hermit of Saba" is but the first part of Freneau's changing philosophic landscape. Within the many prose works included in the Miscellaneous Works is evidence that Freneau wishes to clear away the sense of delusion in human existence that has dominated his poetry and even colors the conclusion of "The Pictures of Columbus." To be sure, several of the essays in this collection reveal the same kind of pessimism that appears in many of the poems. For example, one of Freneau's prose persona, Robert Slender, describes humanity in a light-hearted tone in such brief sketches as "The Man in Business," "The Debtor," "The Bachelor's House," and "The Inexorable Captain," but beneath the gentleness he paints humanity as foolish and selfish (Vitzthum 117). However, one collection of prose works, the "Philosopher of the Forest" essays, represents in several instances Freneau's effort to define order in the midst of chaos through a re-evaluation of the power of human perceptions and to establish concepts of a supreme being and

the human soul. These eleven essays consist of six works originally published between 1781 and 1782 in The Freeman's Journal under the title "The Pilgrim," one unpublished essay dated 1783, and four new essays written for the 1788 collection. The "Pilgrim" essays and the unpublished 1783 work present a primitivist's critical view of contemporary American life in the pessimistic tone of the early 1780's poetry, but the four new essays focus on humanity's epistemological shortcomings and postulate that the universe possesses a design that humanity is incapable of perceiving.

A brief examination of one of the "Pilgrim" essays republished in 1788 will indicate how much Freneau's attitude toward teleological issues changed in the new essays. In "Philosopher of the Forest XI," originally published June 19, 1782, Freneau addresses the discord and violence in humanity that appears from generation to generation and concludes that such psychological shortcomings are part of the random cycles of the universe. His persona, the Philosopher, speculates about the violence that has plagued history and finds that "discord and disorder are interwoven with the nature and constitution of the human race" (Miscellaneous Works 377). Furthermore, what we see once we will see again in future generations, for as one generation returns "to that mortifying dissolution common to all corporeal substances, the same passions, interests, and resentments rise with a succeeding

age from the ashes of the past" (377). He postulates that humans are thus cyclical not only in the flesh but also in the spirit, their psychological being created from an "ocean of...ideas," a pool to which they must return at death. But the philosopher concludes by wondering whether this cycle is in any way divine or if humans are merely a bundle of both material and spiritual atoms:

> [Is humanity] an emanation from the all perfect Spirit, as Plato and many later writers have asserted [it] to be; or, on the contrary, a mere mass of those vexatious, discordant, chaotic atoms which are doomed to be everlastingly at enmity with each other? (380)

In casting human passions in Lucretian terms, Freneau paints social discord as perpetual turmoil recurring in random cycles that cannot be changed or even understood, only endured.

The four new "Philosopher of the Forest" essays appearing in the Miscellaneous Works, however, express a remarkably different perspective which presupposes a design emanating from an all-powerful creative force, both of which escape the perception and understanding of humanity. Because they consist of numerous dream sequences and fables told by supernal agents, most of the Philosopher essays are loosely structured and explore several topics. But three themes associated with the formulation of a cosmic design

reappear in essays II, III, VIII, and IX. Perhaps the most significant recurring theme is the supposition that the natural chaos and human misfortune that is woven into everyday life is actually part of a balanced greater whole that is working toward a benevolent, or at least equitable, end. But the entirety of that design remains unknown to humanity because of the restrictions of human perception and understanding that provide incomplete information and thus a sense of disorder or deception that masks the greater design. Finally, behind this design is Freneau's conception of a supreme being, a vaguely defined creative force that orchestrates the balance of creation yet also appears remote and disinterested in the suffering and discord his creation has wrought. It is from the foundation laid in the "Philosopher of the Forest" essays that Freneau begins to build his rational response to the nihilistic world he perceives.

In essays II and III, Freneau constructs his theory of balance and order through a fable of creation, related to the Philosopher by an angel in a dream that treats the making of both nature and humanity, but in separate episodes. The creation of the animals is governed by a general rule, which is "not to produce any animal except that it should have some other for an enemy" (299). In this way the original elements of the earth remain unaltered as the "everlasting and unerring REASON" (299) has prescribed

through the creation of a balance in the world. Such constant opposition and ruin seems unproductive to the Philosopher, and he asks about the quality of life in a world where creatures live in a seemingly neverending cycle of discord and misery, citing the example of a flying fish, who escapes his pursuers by bursting out of the water only to face flying predators in the air. "Terror and death are his constant companions," notes the Philosopher. "Can existence be a blessing to such a creature; and would not a benevolent mind rather wish him not to be born at all?" (301) The angel explains that the fish's predicament is an example of the existence of a lesser evil to satisfy a greater good. Other creatures depend on the flying fish for sustenance and would die out themselves without it. Through this paradigm, Freneau creates a design that incorporates both the violence inherent in the material world and the stoic attitude he has developed to confront it. Earthly suffering has become a necessary part of a greater plan, albeit an incomprehensible one from a human standpoint.

But a balance in humanity, in Freneau's mind, will not be accomplished through the creation of a natural enemy, for the mental superiority of humans will defeat any threat from the inferior creatures of nature. Humanity's enemy is its own moral deceit and its willingness to prey upon itself for personal gain. Thus in the fable of human creation, the efforts of the creative agents to equal or surpass the noble

original models of man and woman created by the most talented agent, Firando, result in dull, inferior copies such as a thief, a dunce, a sycophant, and several other flawed versions. Ultimately, the "villainous and worthless parts of mankind" are so numerous the original pair is lost among the morally inferior versions. The moral turpitude of these creatures and their tendency to destroy each other inflames one of the agents so much that he creates a snake so deadly that it will destroy any human it bites; he then justifies his creation as the only countermeasure to a creature that "could be guilty of so much premeditated baseness" (301). Firando, though concurring with his fellow agent's assessment of humans, disagrees with his response. He instead invests humanity with the element of honor to compensate for its want of innate rectitude and constructs the soil of the earth in such a way that humans must labor to survive, thereby keeping them too busy to participate solely in schemes and crimes against their fellow humans.

The use of the snake as an enemy and the prescription that humans must labor to survive recall, of course, the biblical fall, but Freneau's purpose is more rational than Christian. Balance in nature is established through the creation of enemies among the animals of the world in order to sustain the whole, but no such natural opposition exists for humanity, which must create its own sense of order. Firando's decision to include honor in the human makeup

implies that humans, possessing both baseness and honor, have the ability to order their own world if they so choose. Balance and order within nature are divinely imposed; within humanity they are dependent upon free will.

Humanity's ability to create a just and orderly society is implicit in the story of human creation. Firando's noble originals do not fall, as in the Garden of Eden, but are "lost" among the inferior forms, suggesting that the original rectitude of humans has been submerged through social evolution, though it can still be reclaimed. Twice in these essays, Freneau cites the superiority of the virtuous mind as the most significant element of human intellect and the means by which humans can best approach the felicity of a supreme being. In a fable from essay II, the Philosopher's angel companion tells of Nature's creation of the forms of all living things on earth from a large globe of wax. Out of this ball she agrees to create several of her favorite forms, including a warrior, statesman, poet, philosopher, and, finally, a "just, disinterested, benevolent, upright, and honest man" (294). This last form she takes to Olympus to lay at the feet of Jupiter as the greatest work, returning the rest to the molten wax ball. The disintegration of the other figures back into the wax ball recalls the return of humans at their death to the "ocean of ideas" in essay XI, but the survival of the virtuous figure suggests the superiority, and perhaps the

divinity, of virtue over the artistic and intellectual achievements of this world.

In essay VIII, Freneau returns to the superiority of virtue, defining it as the central value of human existence. The spirit who is leading the Philosopher through another series of fables and visions finds compensation for "the shortness...and the uncertainty of life" in the satisfaction to be found in virtuous action and thought, for virtue is "the essence of Nature" and provides "the composure and felicity that is, or ought to be, enjoyed by every virtuous mind" (342). The spirit's advocacy of virtuous action recalls both the wax figure of the virtuous man in essay II and Firando's infusion of honor in his creation of humanity in essay III. Freneau's celebration of rectitude may also be an outgrowth of his stoic attitudes, virtue being highly valued among the Stoic philosophers of antiquity, but its purpose at this point remains ill defined. Virtuous thought itself will not create a just and benevolent society unless it is actively applied, and it remained for Freneau to determine the specific role virtue was to play in an ordered society.

The design that these essays speak to, of course, is not readily discernible, certainly if Freneau's poems up to 1788 are any measure. The natural upheaval and spiritual aridity of "Verses Made at Sea," the delusion in "The Vernal Ague," and the bitter resignation of "The Departure" are all

formidable arguments against a belief in design or a divine plan. But the second fundamental point running through these essays is that the sense impressions behind these dark poems are not lies, but rather incomplete pictures, for humanity's perceptions and understanding are inadequate tools for comprehending a cosmic design. The devices Freneau uses to present the Philosopher's narrative highlight human epistemological limitations. Essays II, III, and VIII are each related as dreams in which the Philosopher is guided by a celestial agent, either an angel or a spirit, who often interprets what the Philosopher sees or, as in cases such as the flying fish, explains a purpose or design that he cannot readily see. Even the fable of the creation of the earth, its creatures, and humanity in essays II and III is presented, according to the angel, in a manner compatible with the Philosopher's weak understanding. The power that creates the earth out of chaos is "of a nature too intensely bright for [the Philosopher] to behold" (294), says the angel, so he presents instead "Nature's Journeymen" as agents of the creation.

A more obvious example of limited perception is the fable of the blind mules in essay II. The angel shows the Philosopher a city employed in arts and commerce, yet without water but for the labors of several blind mules circling many wells miles from the city. The Philosopher speaks to one of the mules, who wonders why he is constantly

driven around the same track, often lashed and goaded by a tormentor, and allowed limited rest. Seeing no purpose to his circular labors, he wonders if his creator "takes pleasure in seeing [him] wounded and tormented" or if he has "some wise and benevolent purpose" (291). The angel then points out that if the mule could see that his work supports an entire city he would not feel that he had been created in vain. The mule's situation is, of course, meant to be analogous to that of humans, who are at least partially blinded spatially and temporally and can thus see only the trials of their immediate existence, not their place in a larger cosmic design.

But the most significant expression of epistemological limitation in these essays occurs in number VIII, where the spirit attending the Philosopher relates a new fable of creation which also intimates that an approach to cosmic understanding may lie within nature. The spirit of activity, Volatillo, asks the spirit of animation if he may create a race of creatures from dust and water "the whole end of whose existence should be his amusement" (339). The spirit of animation sets only one condition: to prevent these creatures from getting too clear a picture of the harmony and beauty of the universe and therefore the Deity, they should be of limited faculties so that:

> they should have a glimpse of the wonders around them thro' a medium of thick air, and that, after

> displaying a little while on the stage of human life, they should, as the law of their nature, revert into the identical substances of which they were originally composed. (340)

The Philosopher finds limited knowledge cruel, for humanity is merely tantalized with the wonders of life, "which they must nevertheless forever part with after gazing at and admiring them but for a moment" (341). But the attending spirit replies that even a momentary glimpse of life is far better than an eternity of unconscious being:

> What honor could there be in remaining in the torpid state of the clods of the valley? Who would not prefer a momentary illumination into life and perception, to an eternity of unconscious sleep? This sun, this moon, these stars, this beautiful fabric of land and water, this whole system of animation; are they not well worth the trouble of beholding, though it be but for a moment?--What are the miseries and perplexities of life when put in competition with a single glance of these stupendous wonders, that are continually passing before you on the great ocean of matter? (341-42)

The emphatic affirmation of human experience offered here stands in marked contrast to the gloomy outlook of "The Departure" and "Port Royal," and the proximity of its

appearance to that of these two dark poems suggests that Freneau was perhaps uncomfortable with the role of stoic nihilist. The natural world that was formerly belligerent and deceptive is now, if but for a moment, a source not only of delight but of improved understanding. The "stupendous wonders" of nature are "well worth the trouble of beholding" because they may provide insights, however fleeting, into the nature of existence; the "momentary illumination into life and perception" is an opportunity, not a tragic enticement.

Concurrently evolving with the presupposition of cosmic design in these essays is the evolving definition of a supreme being and an acknowledgement of the immortality of the soul. References to an all-powerful, creative force that cannot be comprehended by human understanding permeate the visions and fables in each of the essays in a variety of forms. In the fable of the molten wax figures in essay II, it takes the form of Nature, "the mother of all men and animals" (292). In the story of creation in essay II, it cannot be beheld by the Philosopher and is therefore represented by human-like "agents of creation." In the second fable of creation in essay eight, it appears as the spirits of activity and animation. Clearly Freneau avoids any suggestion of an anthropomorphic deity; in fact his concept of a supreme being remains vague throughout the remainder of his canon. But one characteristic appearing

here will become more dominant in his subsequent work. When the Philosopher points out in essay III that the opposition and ruin of nature's enemies seems unproductive, his angel companion replies that the supreme maker does not believe the issue to be important. In essay VIII, the spirit Volatillo creates humanity for no other reason than "his amusement." Both examples indicate Freneau's concept of a godhead possesses a level of distance from or disinterest in individual creatures or humans, the total design being of greater importance than the suffering of individuals. Such a position both accounts for the natural violence and decay the poet has focused on in much of his previous work and embraces the deistic idea of "First Cause," which Freneau would find more attractive in the next decade.

Equally vague are Freneau's references to the immortality of the soul. In essay VIII, the Philosopher's spirit guide notes that the discontent humanity feels within itself and for its situation should be "undoubted evidence with you that there is something within [humans] different from mere material mechanism, totally distinct from the elementary principles, and which shall live again in after ages in the bright regions you see beyond the skies" (338). Later in the same essay, the spirit of animation describes death in dualistic terms, wherein the the "perceptive faculties" of the physical being are destroyed but the "principle of REASON" (340) remains. These examples

represent a sharp about-face for Freneau, whose earlier questions about death and afterlife culminated in the darker attitudes of "The Wild Honey Suckle," "The Indian Burying Ground," and "The Dying Indian." Yet Freneau's conception of immortality is as vague as his conception of a deity because both lie beyond the pale of human perception and comprehension. What their ambiguity represents is the poet's compromise between a priori suppositions and his continuing commitment to empirical observation. He is unwilling to reject material observation as a legitimate source of knowledge, but he has also concluded that sense impressions are incomplete.

Freneau's focus on such abstractions as universal design or a divine plan, immortality of the soul, and human epistemological limits are obviously remote from the empiricism of his earlier work. The last of the new essays in the Philosopher of the Forest series, number IX, seems to acknowledge this new direction by confronting the unavoidable difficulty of working beyond material observations to rational abstractions. Here Freneau discards the supernal figure as an intermediary between higher knowledge and human intellect, for his topic requires a distinctly human point of view. It begins with a Polish immigrant who tells the story of his travels through the United States to the philosopher and a clergyman, a recurring character in the essays. The immigrant had come

to America after hearing stories of freedom and wealth, only to find poverty, crime, and dishonesty, and concludes that "virtue, honesty, sincerity, and complete felicity are not to be discovered in any country without a large mixture of the dregs of baseness, villainy, and misery" (349).

The clergyman calls the immigrant's search foolish and says that felicity is not to be found in the external world but within the heart of each individual. The key to contentment, he says, is the capacity to enjoy one's heart in all circumstances:

> ...I pity the man who cannot be gay in adversity and sincerely cheerful even when banished into the gloomy deserts of Tartary. God and Nature never meant to limit the happiness of the mind to the fortuitous circumstances of place or condition. He has rather placed its felicity beyond the power of chance or accident....How wretched is that man who expects full content from external things! (351)

In asking for acceptance of all conditions in life and contending that happiness is centered within the self, the clergyman is offering stoicism as a living creed. But the Philosopher then interjects that such a concept is difficult to comprehend in everyday life. The beauties and consolations of virtuous behavior are pleasing subjects to those who are not acquainted with the nature of the material

world, he says, but the effects of virtue are not apparent in everyday life, so such rewards as the clergyman mentions are not often fully enjoyed in the present state of being because the senses are acted upon only by material objects. It is therefore difficult for humans to divorce themselves from the physical world and contemplate abstractions about which they know very little and which are wholly described in physical terms. A starving man, he concludes, cannot be helped with a lecture on the virtues of abstinence.

In essay IX Freneau, in arguing that material creatures living a material existence will not easily grasp the abstractions of reason, once more outlines the central point of these four essays, that humanity does not possess the depth of perception or understanding to directly discover the design or divine plan that governs material existence. The use of such devices as dreams, supernal spirits of higher intelligence, and agents of creation in the three previous essays is a departure from the realistic observations he has been making in his poetry for most of the decade, but they also represent Freneau's effort to present rational alternatives to the discouraging views empiricism had given him. In this last essay, he abandons these devices and returns to a realistic point of view, where he admits that combining rational abstractions with empirical observations and material needs is a difficult if not impossible task. But in many respects this is the task

Freneau accepts as his poetry takes on an increasingly rational color in the next decade.

Because of their introduction of a priori suppositions and the foundation that these suppositions create for Freneau's rational philosophies from the late 1790's until the end of his career, the four "Philosopher of the Forest" essays represent the fulcrum on which the poet's philosophical evolution turns. With the introduction of these new ideas about epistemological limitations and the possibility of cosmic design, Freneau's subsequent work adopts a new perspective, especially the prose and poetry that appears concurrently with or immediately after the "Philosopher" essays.

"Light Summer Reading," for example, another prose piece from the Miscellaneous Works, has been described as "the most chilling...story" of those told by the persona Robert Slender (Vitzthum 117). Subtitled as a story "which may possibly please such as have a true taste for modern Novels," (251) its narrative concerning the disturbed Marcia, who has been rejected by a man who thought she wanted to marry him for his money, satirizes sentimental novels through the intense and overwrought use of madness, betrayal, and death. But if we examine the story in the context of Freneau's more optimistic point of view in "The Philosopher of the Forest" series, "Light Summer Reading" simultaneously satirizes the stoic pessimism of Freneau's

earlier poems through the opposing viewpoints of the man in the white linen coat, acting as the mouthpiece of Freneau's rational cosmic vision, and a young poet who represents Freneau's earlier gloom and discouragement.

As in the Philosopher's numerous visions, the man in the white linen coat does not deny the chaotic appearances of existence. He calls Marcia's melancholy over her lover's sudden departure an example of the random appearance of discord in the universe:

> This I take to be one of those accidental events ...which cannot be foreseen or avoided. Nature has ever been at variance with fate and accident. The web she has so admirably wrought, is at the same time of so fine and delicate a thread, that every little petulant fly can break through it at pleasure. The most curious and complicated machines, such as clocks and watches, are most easily put out of order,...whereas the corn mill, or the smoke jack will perform what is expected from them for years, without any considerable deviation from the purpose of the artist. (254)

Under these circumstances, he says, humans enjoy life on "precarious terms" (255), for both their physical and emotional well being can be affected at any moment by what they perceive to be evils.

When the man in the white linen coat later discovers in Marcia's garden a poem "upon the misery of man, the brevity and infelicity of life, and the certainty of death," he describes it as a dangerous book, for "it hardly ever fails to deject and darken the mind with its melancholy and dismal prospects" (256) for humanity. In response to such pessimism (including Freneau's own dark attitudes), the man in the white linen coat takes up several arguments from "The Philosopher of the Forest" essays that counter discouraging perceptions with rational explanations. He insists that humanity is ill-equipped to discover empirically any sense of a cosmic design. Like the spirit in essay VIII who calls humans deluded for seeking things "that are incompatible with [their] abilities" (338), he explains that humans should neither "expect more from nature than ever she intended to give" nor "look for the gardens of paradise in a wilderness of weeds" (257). He also asserts that laments over physical decay or the fatality of accidents are absurd reasons for melancholy, pointing out how all of life "proceeds from decay itself, and without it the whole face of nature would soon wear the wrinkles of old age" (257), which recalls the fate of the flying fish in essay III's story of creation.

The man in the white linen coat is moved to echo the spirit in essay VIII and assert that "ages of darkness and oblivion are the easiest of all compensations for that

momentary view of so glorious a display of [the] wonders" (257) of the visible creation. His optimism reaches a zenith as he describes how, without the balancing effect of the azure sky, "the sun, the moon, and stars would appear to be fastened upon the shadows of death" (258) when he and the narrator see the young poet at the other end of Marcia's garden.

Described as "half mad..., [and] likewise extravagantly fond of mad people" (258), the poet appears to be the antithesis of the man in the white linen coat, possessing the dark vision and destructive melancholia his counterpart has just disparaged. He also appears to represent Freneau himself, for his biographical background, such as his "smattering of education [that] few or none have ever been the better of" (260), his familiarity with the ancient classics, and his numerous sea voyages, parallels Freneau's. But what clearly connects him to Freneau is the poem the man in the white linen suit shows to the narrator as a sample of the poet's work. Entitled "To Marcia," it is in fact a slightly revised version of Freneau's "Stanzas to a Young Lady in a Consumption," published originally in The Freeman's Journal in 1786. It focuses on Marcia's distorted point of view that, like the speaker of "The Vernal Ague," sees decay in all existence and foreshadows her death in language similar to "The Wild Honey Suckle" (Vitzthum 118). The poet then confirms his affinity with Marcia's fatalistic

attitudes by claiming in the last stanza that he learns his philosophy from her. Both the poet's attraction to melancholy and gloom and the poem's stylistic resemblance to Freneau's darker verse strongly suggest that the young poet represents a parody of Freneau's nihilistic vision.

Reacting to the poet's attraction to "reason in ruins" (260), the man in the white linen coat contrasts the poet's tragic point of view with the advantages of imagination, a position Freneau has spent much of the 1780's maligning. He calls imagination "a never failing source of pleasurable ideas" that can "lay brighter colours upon the gloomier scenes of life...[and] transfer every thing that happens in real life to the more agreeable landscapes of an inchanted and fictitious country" (261). But the immediate appearance of two additional poems of the young poet, both of which turn from romance to pessimism, indicate that Freneau is not embracing imagination again but rather outlining his own career between the early 1770's and late 1780's and the unpleasant destination at which he has arrived.

The final two scenes reconfirm both Freneau's revised attitude toward human immortality and his disenchantment with his own stoic pessimism. The first describes Marcia's funeral following her sudden death and centers around an Indian doctor who must speak a benediction over her grave because the officiating clergyman has lost his text. Instead of speaking mournfully of death, the Indian

celebrates the woman's death as her passage to "the fine ethereal substance that does not cease to think, and shall be again employed by the immortal gods to put the forms of things in motion" (267). As the mourners are leaving the churchyard, however, they are once more "gratified with a view of the crack-brained poet" (268), who now sounds far less affected by Marcia's death. Here stoic indifference becomes heartless deceit as the poet's heavy hearted attitude turns flippant:

> But why (continued he) need we make so many words about so trivial a matter as the death of Marcia, inasmuch as she was not mistress of twenty thousand pounds?--Besides, such events as these happen almost every day in some one part of the world or another!--However, her story may answer well enough to tell to the boys and girls, as their amusement ought to be consulted as well as that of men of sense. (269)

The young poet's final thoughts, perhaps meant to be stoic, are actually cruelly indifferent and set up his concluding epitaph, supposedly an address by Marcia from the grave. The message, however, is not about the certainty of death but the inefficacy of pessimism and melancholy. Her concluding cry of "Wake me, wake me--I came not here to sleep" resounds with a regret that perhaps Freneau feels about the discouraging tone that much of his work has

expressed up to this point.

Through "Light Summer Reading" Freneau begins to separate himself from the dark nihilism he had developed for almost a decade, but more important are the numerous echoes of his growing speculations about a godhead, immortality, and the possibility of a universal design conceived by a supreme being, all of which grew out of the "Philosopher of the Forest" series. Such speculations would have their effect on Freneau's poetry that immediately followed the Miscellaneous Works. In many of these poems, Freneau begins to look at both nature and society from a different perspective; what were once human foibles, for example, such as avarice and ambition, become necessary to the growth and well-being of society and are the results of the active and aggressive mind that the poet celebrated in "The Pictures of Columbus." What he begins to seek is a compromise between the empiricism that perceives chaos in both nature and man and the rational suppositions of universal design he has begun to formulate. The result is a more tolerant attitude toward both nature and human society.

Perhaps nowhere is this compromise more evident than in a series of poems appearing in The Daily Advertiser between March and June of 1790 that were originally intended as a single epic poem entitled The Rising Empire.[1] Though the project was never completed, six of the remaining seven

poems characterize the people of six individual states, while the seventh, titled "Philosophical Sketch of America" serves as both an introduction to these states and an expression of the universal design behind their creation and evolution.

Though not the first of the six poems to appear when it was published on March 13, 1790, "Philosophical Sketch of America" provides the foundation from which one can examine the rest of the series. Freneau's definition of America encompasses both the northern and southern continents, a land so vast it "teems with all life" (8). The emphasis on size lends drama to its creation, described as a cataclysmic explosion of land from beneath the sea. Such violence and chaos are acknowledged as an ongoing characteristic of this world:

> Perpetual change its varying nature feels,
> The wave once flow'd that now with frost congeals,
> Suns on its breast have shed a feebler fire,
> Oceans have roll'd where mountains now aspire.
>
> (13-16)

This same inclination toward chaos dominates humans as well, for their "changeful temper" is derived from the "differing earths" (17-18) from which they come.

But Freneau leaves no doubt that there is a supernal force behind creation, governing its development. A "voice that shook all Nature's frame" (11) produced the American

continents, while humanity was created by "some creating flame" (22). In addition, the theory of the migration of animals and Indians from Asia to the Americas is rejected; instead "the great disposing power" (25) creates all from "this common dust" (34). The subordination of the physical world to a creative power is a fundamental change in Freneau's philosophy. Both the restless and destructive impulses in humanity and the transience of land are linked to a single source of absolute power as an integral part of creation whose purpose is beyond human understanding (Vitzthum 141).

Such disorder must now be viewed and understood as part of the cosmic whole, so "the splendid power" (40) in turn instills a level of intelligence, or "reasoning souls" (42), in humans so that they can first confront nature and change it to their benefit and then "Bow to the works of Heaven--and own them right" (49). The submissive tone of this final line suggests a limited capacity to understand, but these "reasoning souls" will nonetheless have the opportunity at least to acknowledge the outline of a cosmic design and recognize their role within it.

The co-existence of opposing natural forces as well as opposing human characteristics is embodied in the first poem of the Rising Empire series, "A Descriptive Sketch of Maryland," which originally appeared in March. The opening four lines reintroduce nature's dualistic roles of nurturing

and destruction that have appeared so frequently before. Describing Maryland as "torn from itself...[by] Chesapeake's angry tide" (1-2), the speaker emphasizes the violence of creation yet two lines later acknowledges that the state is also "a fertile region with a temperate sky" (4). Such coupling of opposing points of view marks the remainder of the poem, which describes both the benefits and shortcomings of urban commerce and rural agrarianism. Vitality radiates from the descriptions of Baltimore's transformation from a sleepy inlet to a busy port that now claims "importance from her busy growth" (14). But the price of commercial success is a growing taste for pleasure and finery, so much so that the residents trade their wealth for "foreign trappings" (18) and pleasure, even at the risk of their fortunes. Their energy contrasts with the dullness of inland rural life, where the "lofty mansion" (41), enlivened with "no sprightly action" (38), appears sullen next to the coastal citizens who "delight/ In dances measured by the winter's night" (26). The vitality of the coast compared to the lethargy of the rural inland is another reflection of Freneau's use of the sea as a symbol of aggressiveness and intellectual vigor, but the coast's seemingly superior characterization should not detract from the fact that both the coastal and rural regions use the violent and fertile products of creation to their advantage and thus successfully coexist.

"A Description of Pennsylvania," appearing one week later, uses imagery of land and water once again, only here the passive fertility of the land and the violent nature of the water are integrated to form a healthy, vibrant society. The poem begins with the pastoral fruitfulness of Pennsylvania's inland plains, but the soil and its plenty are tied inexorably to the network of rivers that either carry its harvest to the coast or occasionally overflow with floods that "through groves or mountains stray" (11). Yet both the utility and the violence of nature are part of the overall design directed by a supreme power:

> The God of nature still directs the way,
> With fondest care has trac'd each river's bed
> And mighty streams thro' mighty forests led,
> Bade agriculture thus export her freight,
> The strength and glory of this favour'd State.
> (12-16)

The successful synthesis of land and water into a benevolent force of growth and development leads to the introduction of its human counterpart, William Penn, who personifies the application of humanity's rational gifts to the improvement of society. Penn is presented as a wandering pioneer, new to the land, who "made barren forests bloom" (19), "beheld his tribes increase" (23), and "Bade virtue flourish in this foreign land" (26). Penn becomes the prototype of the "rational" man that Freneau would

champion over the remainder of his career, vigorously applying his intellectual gifts and benevolent spirit to improve humanity's place in the material world.

Freneau then curiously separates Penn from his Quaker brethren in the poem's final section, in which he contrasts the leader's energetic mind with his followers' languid torpor, so "pacific in each aim" (27) that they become "all complaisant to power/ To bow to ruffians in the trying hour" (43-44). Their failure is that it is "on visions, [that] they...place their trust" (38) not on reason and action; they thus become metaphysical dreamers who separate themselves from reality (Vitzthum 146) and become foils to the aggressive, creative Penn.

Like "A Description of Pennsylvania," the next poem of this series to appear, "A View of Massachusetts" on March 29, also reintroduces the pastoral image of the land as a provider, the labors of the "industrious swain" (4) creating agrarian wealth. But this agricultural inclination is undercut by a commercial impulse that drives the people to sea; the quiet of "smiling plenty" (3) is replaced with "bold avarice" (18) and the "frequent tempests" (13) of the ocean. It is these ambitious impulses, however, that give a people vitality, acting as a "great effect...That holds in happier bonds our restless race" (19-20). Avarice and ambition, once social ills, are now necessary ingredients in human development and find their greatest expression in

the aggressiveness symbolized by the sea.

A society without such drives is like a land-locked lake, "unfed by springs" (23) and "Unmov'd by moons" (25), that eventually becomes "a putrid nuisance" (27), apathetic and lethargic. Without the addition of new currents or forces to change the water's makeup or compel its movement, the lake stagnates. Freneau argues that the same fate awaits societies that fail to react to the forces and impulses that affect them, even if they are potentially destructive, for they are ultimately the source of a healthy society:

> Thus, even base avarice helps to make us blest
> Nor vainly planted in the human breast,--
> With her, <u>ambition</u> join'd; they proudly drive,
> Rule all our race, and keep the world alive.
> (29-32)

"Base" as these drives may be, they are the foundation of Massachusetts' success and the source of the people's "unconquer'd spirit" that made them leaders during the American Revolution.

The "Description of Connecticut," which appeared on May 10, contains the same revolutionary spirit, but it otherwise bears little resemblance to either Pennsylvania or Massachusetts. Connecticut's land possesses none of the fertility of either of its sister states nor is its commerce invested with the same adventurous vigor. Though "all are

bent on gain" (12), the energy of the people is instead tied up in unproductive legal squabbling and shallow learning. More damning is the petty use of their gifts. They are "fond to converse, [but] with deep designing views" (23), suggesting a greater interest in specific ends than in intellectual inquiry, and equally "fond of [their] wit, but fonder to be paid" (25). Nor do they use the natural gifts given them; the state possesses "commodious ports" (3) and an abundance of inland waters, but the spirit of commercial development seems lacking. The final eight-line passage attempts to balance this rancorous view by praising Connecticut's patriotic fervor, but the state finally proves to be a foil to the vitality of Pennsylvania and Massachusetts.

The most obvious foil, however, is the languid stagnation described in "A Descriptive Sketch of Virginia," published on June 11 as the last of the Rising Empire poems. Freneau claims the Virginians live in the past and "swell" with their "imagined rank" (2-3). Compared to the vigor of its northern neighbors, Virginia lacks intellectual vitality and commercial drive, relying instead on slavery to sustain itself. As a result, their "high aspiring soul [and]...firm unconquered mind" (16-17), a reference to Virginia's rapid development as a colony, have been replaced with the "haughty air" and "proud demeanor" of a race "averse to toil" (26-28) and intellectual effort. Worst of all, the

Virginia landowner does not use resources to achieve a sustainable economy but "heaps up wealth from luxury and pride,/ Exports the produce of exhausted plains" (47-48).

Most significant is Freneau's handling of Virginia's waterways. In Pennsylvania they play an active role in the commercial success of the state and contribute to the land's well-being. But in Virginia the rivers instead are associated with stagnation and indolence. The James does not feed into the ocean but "repells" (53) it, suggesting isolation from the greater world. On the Potomac, the "wondering eye" (55) of a sailor sees on the shore the results of shortsighted sloth:

> Impoverish'd fields that near their margins lie,
> Mercantile towns where dullness holds her reign
> And boors, too lazy to manure the plain:--
>
> (56-58)

Like the people of Connecticut, the Virginians have wasted their resources by failing to apply their reason to improve their land and their society. As Vitzthum points out, Virginia is the lake in "A View of Massachusetts" gone bad, lacking the energies generated by ambition to create the vitality of Massachusetts or Pennsylvania (150).

The compromises born of new philosophic ideas permeate the Rising Empire poems. The dual roles of destruction and nurturing in nature that once seemed incomprehensible to Freneau are now complementary, parts of the same cycles of

existence. Human drives that once seemed to undermine the fabric of society now are necessary to its development. Symbiotic relationships grow out of conflicting forces, driven by Freneau's growing inference of a greater design directed by a higher authority that nonetheless remains ill defined. These compromises and the associated re-evaluations of the material world that come with them continued to take root in Freneau's poetry in the early 1790's.

One of the most symbolically dense examples of such a re-evaluation appeared in an untitled poem in the Daily Advertiser on May 1, 1790, that was later republished with an additional stanza as "Constantia" in the National Gazette in August 1792. In "Constantia" Freneau explores the failure of both pastoral romanticism and clear-eyed realism in the figures of Constantia and a sailor trying to seduce her. Constantia wishes to withdraw from the world into a convent, declaring herself "sick of the world" (1) and the illusions of its "balls and plays" (3) and bent upon viewing existence through the eyes of cloistered religion. The sailor argues that withdrawal from the reality of experience withers human beings and leads to a passionless existence "[w]here kisses freeze and love is snow" (12). In the 1792 version, which also appears in Freneau's 1795 collection, the sailor adds in the new stanza that rural isolation will be a waste of her female fertility:

"The barren oak and cluster'd pine
"Afford a gloomy, sad delight;
"But why that bloom of health resign,
"The mingled tint of red and white:
"In cloister'd cells the flowers expire
"That on the plain all eyes admire.

(Miscellaneous Works, 381-82, ll. 13-18)

Only a hermit could enjoy such a life, he says, which, of course, recalls the delusions of the romantic hermit of Saba. But when he closes his argument by telling her his "painted barque" awaits her, he hints at the failure of the empirical realism that Freneau has so often connected with the sea, for the "painted barque" calls to mind the same image in "The Lost Adventurer" that seduced Ralph into the terrors and disappointments of seafaring.

Constantia's reply to the sailor's entreaties becomes Freneau's opportunity to further define the failures of empirical realism. She proclaims that she will have nothing to do with the life of a seaman and tells him to "plough [his] gloomy seas" (23). Beyond the obvious sexual reference, this line also implies that Freneau's realism has turned into a fallow field that is philosophically barren. She grants that the clear-eyed realism and fortitude required of life at sea has "great merit" (35) but contends that the sailor must remain closer to land if they are to enjoy any kind of a relationship.

In the concluding stanza, their compromise requires that they both give up something, she her plans to withdraw from experience and he the rugged realities of the sea. Philosophically, this union possesses a two-fold meaning. First, Constantia's change of heart about repairing to "Bethlehem's walls" (5) reiterates Freneau's long-standing rejection of romantic escapism, but the sailor's decision to give up the sea for the land-based Constantia signifies both the sterility of empirical realism and its incompleteness (Vitzthum 138). In neglecting "his prospects of the deep" (39), the sailor is abandoning his livelihood, while Freneau is giving up the "prospects" of chaos and nihilism. Second, the union of Constantia and the sailor symbolically reflects how the merging of disparate elements makes for the harmonious whole that Freneau celebrates in the Rising Empire poems. Just as he draws her back into empirical experience, she draws him away from the disorder of the sea, and the fecundity of their marriage demonstrates how seemingly conflicting forces will create the same prosperous harmony found in the poetic sketches of Massachusetts and Pennsylvania.

This same spirit of compromise governs Freneau's revised attitudes about the duality of nature in "Stanzas Written on the Hills of Neversink, near Sandy Hook, 1790," in which the poet establishes a middle ground between the pastoralism of land and the violence of the sea (Vitzthum

151). The opening lines of this early 1791 poem celebrate the strength and permanence of nature, not its transience, a far different attitude from that expressed in many poems of the 1780's. The "distant wave/ That sinks the neighboring land" (3-4) is no longer an example of transient decay but part of the plan of a "happy genius" (2). The hills are now "impervious to the wind" (7) and the oaks in their strength bend to the tempests but do not break. Even the name "Neversink" denotes a durability that is absent from the land in earlier poems, such as "The American Village" or "Port Royal" (Vitzthum 153). The solitude of the hills and the "bold and broken shore" that would have earlier provoked a sense of despair are now sources of awe and respect.

Whereas decay incited dolor, this sense of nature's permanence inspires feelings of comfort in its presence and loss at its absence:

> With towering crest, you first are doom'd
> The news of Land to tell;
> To him that comes, fresh joys impart,
> To him that goes, a heavy heart,
> The lover's long farewell! (14-18)

Freneau's newly found happiness with nature is contrasted in the third stanza with his former characterizations of natural turmoil, again embodied in the violence of the ocean:

You saw me rig the barque, so trim,
To trace a tiresome road;
By wintry seas and tempests chas'd
You saw me o'er the ocean haste,
A comfortless abode! (23-27)

The solitary realism of the sea and its offspring, stoicism, labeled now as "tiresome" and "comfortless," are shunned once again as alien to human felicity.

It must be understood, however, that Freneau is again seeking a middle ground between romance and empirical realism. The springs of Neversink may be a "luxury to sip" (29), but this celebration of nature can only go so far. The hills themselves are apparently out of reach of humans; only deer reside in its "rural retirements" (32), and the very tops of these "dark groves" are "in aether lost" (34), so remote from human experience that even "the trembling rustic" (36) would admit, unlike the hermit of Saba, that this world is beyond human grasp (Vitzthum 154). Total romanticism, like pure empiricism, is incomplete.

In the final stanza Freneau declares that he is now "tenacious of the shore" (40), meaning he is free from the dominance of empiricism and the resulting perceptions of disorder. The "passing sail" and its connections to a world of chaos no longer attract Freneau as the only epistemological certainty. His focus on the "Soft sleep and ease, blest days and nights" (43), the products of

Neversink's benign shore, is far different from the confusion of "The Vernal Ague," where perceptions of both renewal and decay create depression and resignation. Nature's duality is no longer a contradiction but instead represents opposing parts of a larger design.

Another poem appearing in the Daily Advertiser in 1791, "Minerva's Advice," both reinforced Freneau's changing attitude toward nature and reintroduced his belief in the necessity of applying human reason to nature. Using the ancient myth of Jason and the Golden Fleece, Freneau takes his symbolic use of the sea as the source of hard-won experience and puts a new twist on it, for instead of discovering their own impotence in the face of disorder, Jason and his crew combat and overcome the sea's violence. Suggestions of inexperience dominate the beginning of the poem. "With sails so white and masts so slim" (3), the Argo's pristine appearance implies innocence and unreliability. Its very newness attracts the attention of Neptune, who whispers to the speaker that those "Who know not danger, know not fear" (8) and observes that these green sailors believe the ocean to be no more violent than a river.

When the scene shifts to the ocean, however, the tempests reveal the crew's unpreparedness. While most of them lie seasick on the decks and Jason himself trembles with fear, the ship's pilot, like the ineffective pilot of

"Verses Made at Sea," cries that the ship is lost. But the tone of "Minerva's Advice" shares none of the grimness of its 1785 predecessor. In the midst of this storm appears Minerva, who tells Jason that honor demands courage, for mere "Sighs ne'er will hush the waves to peace" (29). Virtue cannot be found in passive endurance but active change, she says, couching her advice in flippant, offhand language:

> To labour drive the skulking crew,
> That now their speedy ruin mourn:
> Jove hates the wretch that's in the dumps,
> But smiles on him that jogs the pumps. (33-36)

The burlesque tone of these lines reflects the change in Freneau's attitude toward humanity's relationship with nature, but more important is the message that humanity is responsible for its own survival. Skill and science were supposedly of no use in 1785, but now "bring[ing] the yards and topmasts down" (40) is far more effective than offering "sneaking prayers" (39) up to Jove or simply accepting humanity's impotence before nature. Jason faces the storm by taking control of his ship and crew and concludes the poem with this "grave remark" (48):

> Danger the ruffian never meets,
> As he grows saucy, she retreats! (49-50)

Jason's transformation from trembling tar to assured, almost swaggering, sailor is the benefit of his aggressively

confronting nature and seeking the means to control or at least withstand its power. That the solution to his problem is divinely imparted also indicates that human reason shares a divine connection with a vague supernal power that is here masked behind ancient mythology.

Both of these conclusions are key components of the philosophic re-evaluation Freneau underwent between 1788 and 1792. Out of his perceptions of anarchy and their corresponding spiritual emptiness comes a rational response that affirms the existence of an omnipotent creative power who is responsible for the order and design of this universe. Because humans are ill-equipped either to perceive or understand the design of a superior intelligence, the decay within nature and the destructiveness of humanity are but a small part of a greater whole. Freneau consequently revises his interpretations of his perceptions and alters the recurring symbolism of his poetry to at least intimate the greater design that human understanding can only begin to envision. By 1792 the poet has reclaimed faith in both the world of the spirit and the benevolence of nature, despite its violence. At the same time he espouses the aggressive use of reason to improve humanity's place in this grand design, even to the inclusion of impulses he originally disparaged. Over the remainder of his career, Freneau would begin to codify his rationalist turn in deistic trappings.

Endnotes

[1] In *Land and Sea* Vitzthum excludes "A View of Rhode Island," published in *The Daily Advertiser* on February 4, 1790, because Freneau's omission of the poem in both the 1795 and 1809 collections makes attribution doubtful. Hiltner also excludes the poem from *The Newspaper Verse of Philip Freneau*. I have therefore excluded the poem as well, having no grounds to dispute the position of either.

CHAPTER 5: THE RATIONAL SOLUTION

During much of the 1790's Freneau published a limited amount of lyric poetry, concentrating his efforts on editing several newspapers, including the National Gazette, the Jersey Chronicle, and the Time Piece and Literary Companion. The only major milestone of Freneau's poetic career during this decade is the publication of his 1795 collection, Poems Written between 1764 and 1794. Freneau supervised the publication of this work in an effort to create a definitive collection of his poems, in many cases softening some of his pessimistic verse to match his revised philosophic point of view (Vitzthum 164). The new verse that appeared after the 1795 collection deals more often with political and social topics as he focused on issues concerning the public good in both poetry and prose. Emory Elliott has pointed to the civic-mindedness of this work as Freneau's incorporation of John Witherspoon's Common Sense dictum that literature should have the power to improve the morals and character of a people (136). But this same dictum could well characterize the didacticism that permeates the new lyrics that began to appear more frequently after 1800, particularly the handful of philosophic poems published in Freneau's last two collections in 1809 and 1815. The private symbolism of his earlier work, particularly the polarities represented by his use of land and sea imagery,

is replaced with a far more explicit style that openly philosophizes about the topics he had ruminated upon in less accessible language during the previous two decades. Apparently Freneau now felt that he had come to acceptable solutions to his philosophic dilemmas and believed his message to be more important than poetic complexity.

That message is embodied in a formalized, poetic expression of the rational presuppositions he had begun to formulate toward the end of the 1780's. The most significant of these is his now firm belief in a cosmic design governing the universe, a design that is only partially discernible through empirical perception because external reality can provide only limited knowledge. Human comprehension of such a divine purpose requires that observation of the natural world be complemented by the vigorous exercise of intellect, for the active use of reason for social and intellectual improvement is an inherent part of the design. Freneau focuses on the intellect as the chief tool of enlightenment because reason is to be considered the center of humanity's spiritual being, a direct, if somewhat faint, connection to the supreme being, who is conceived in Freneau's cosmos as pure Reason. Also inherent in the design is an on-going balance of creative and destructive forces that in effect maintain corporeal life on earth. Creation, as it was described in "Philosophical Sketch of America," becomes the product of

violence, while decay becomes the source of nature's cycle of renewal. Therefore, what appears to be random pain and destruction actually sustains the greater whole.

The tenets of Freneau's rationalist vision are similar to those of the Deists, whose natural religion gained a foothold in America during the eighteenth century, particularly among students and upper class Americans between the 1760's and the beginning of the nineteenth century. Herbert Morais has cited among the general characteristics of Deism an emphasis on the practice of virtue, a belief in revelation through the observation of nature, a conception of God as a "passive policeman" who does not interfere in the material world, and a belief in a continuing existence after death (77-84). Among Freneau's contemporaries, these ideas were nowhere better expressed than in Thomas Paine's The Age of Reason, published in two parts in 1794 and 1796. Intended as an assault upon revealed religion as being supererogatory to natural religion, The Age of Reason simultaneously declares Paine's belief in natural revelation, in which God is discovered through the application of empirical science to the machinery of the universe so that we may discover "the whole extent of those laws, and...what are commonly called the powers of nature" (Paine I, 93). Though Freneau makes no direct reference to The Age of Reason in his poetry, he does mention Paine's work in one of the Robert Slender letters

he published in the Aurora, a Philadelphia newspaper, during 1799, in which he points out the orthodox clergy's objections to Paine's attacks on divine revelation. (Leary That Rascal Freneau 301).

Freneau's later poetry embodies several deistic characteristics in one form or another, though his conception of both a supreme being and the immortality of the soul remained couched in ambiguous language, perhaps a product of his insistence that both a deity and afterlife can only be inferred from the empirical world. Because this cosmological view can be inferred only through rational study of the material world, many of these later lyrics approach the epistemological question of human perception and conclude that universal design is only partially discernible to the limited intellect of humans. Consequently, images of natural discord and social upheaval that once represented a universe without purpose are now viewed as a small part of a plan too large and detailed for our understanding.

"On False Systems of Government, and the Generally Debased Condition of Mankind," for example, treats human understanding as a pale replica of the mind of the supreme being. Though at many points a political poem about the evils of monarchies, it eventually focuses on reason as the divine connection between humanity and the deity, a connection that has become weak over time and has been

further corrupted by the tyrannical political climates that have exploited humanity's baser instincts. The first half of the poem maintains that governments as they currently exist cannot be expected to nurture what is best in humanity. Monarchies diffuse human rights to a select few while seeking "To embroil and curse mankind" (42) by wasting "with wars, with blood to stain/ The Maker's works below" (47-48). Even republics may ultimately be found fit only to "tread the stage where tyranny began" (18). Ideally, government should encourage the exercise of virtue and intellect in its people:

> Instruct them well in Reason's school,
> Inform our active race;--
> True honor to the mind impart,
> With Virtue's precepts warm the heart,
> Not urge it to be base. (50-54)

At this point the poem turns from the relationship between society and government to that between humanity and the deity. Moved toward virtuous behavior, people will become "sublimer, and superior far" (62) and will enter into a "harmony not understood" (65). The root of this mysterious consonance is a spiritual connection between humans and the supreme being who created them:

> For, in our race, derang'd, bereft,
> The departing God some vestige left
> Of worth before possess'd,

Which full, which fair, which perfect shone,
Which love and peace, in concord sown,
Rul'd and inspir'd each breast. (67-72)

Freneau implies the passing of an Edenic age, in which the fall is from virtue, not grace, and the result is a feeble image of a divine spirit that once permeated humanity but now appears as "shades of that prevailing mind" (74). This much weaker vessel, poorly equipped to understand the social and political turmoil of the world, thus wonders why "reason [is]...called supreme/ Where nations find no rest" (95-96) and concludes that nature is mere chaos:

What are the ends of Nature's laws?
What folly prompts, what madness draws
Mankind in chains too strong?
Nature to us confus'd appears;
On little things she wastes her cares,
The great seem sometimes wrong.
(103-08)

The italicized qualifications appearing in the final three lines, however, clearly indicate that human perceptions of disorder are the products of intellectual and spiritual limitations, the same limitations that could not see past a violent hurricane or the wilting honey suckle. Nature's "confusion" may be more perception than reality, which insinuates the poem's subtle optimism. Freneau describes humanity as a malformed tree that "when

hew'd away" (85) will be replaced with an "infant shoot [that] in time will swell...To all that Heaven design'd" (88-90). Here Freneau hints at what several subsequent poems such as "Science Favourable to Virtue" and "Reflections on the Power of Human Understanding" will boldly state: that the active exercise and development of the reason shared by all humanity will create order out of disorder.

"On False Systems of Government" appeared in its final form in 1802 as a synthesis of two earlier poems published in 1797 and 1800.[1] Subsequent poems, most of which would appear in his last two collections in 1809 and 1815, would further support the assertion that humans were quite capable of perceiving suggestions of design amidst the chaos of the natural world, but that both the total design itself and its author could only be inferred. "Reflections on the Constitution, or Frame of Nature," from the 1809 collection Poems Written and Published during the American Revolutionary War, celebrates the symmetry and order of the cosmos and finds reason to infer the existence of a benign supreme being. Freneau describes the "exact design" (Poems (1809) I, 262-63, l. 9) and "nicest order" (11) of this "unvarying" (16) machine and declares that the very constitution of the universe must lead a "reasoning human soul" to infer "an author of the whole" (19-20) who is eternal and omnipresent. The earth, he continues, must lead

to the same inference, for this same presence can be seen "through skies, o'er seas, o'er lands" (25).

But beyond the powers of empirical observation humans are left only with speculation. The beginning of this world, the limits of the universe, and the characteristics of its maker are all beyond empirical discovery:

> Where ends this world, or when began
> This spheric point displayed to man?--
> No limit has the work divine,
> Nor owns a circumscribing line.
>
> Beyond what mind or thought conceives,
> Our efforts it in darkness leaves;
> And Nature we, by Reason's aid,
> Find boundless as the power that made.
>
> (29-36)

Freneau's concept of a limited discovery of the supreme being mirrors Paine's argument in The Age of Reason that characterizes the book of Job as the continuing contemplation of two questions:

> First,--Canst thou by searching find out God? Yes; because in the first place, I know I did not make myself, and yet I have existence; and by searching into the nature of other things, I find that no other thing could make itself; and yet millions of other things exist; therefore it is,

> that I know, by positive conclusion resulting from this search, that there is a power superior to all those things, and that power is God.
>
> Second,--Canst thou find out the Almighty to perfection? No; not only because the power and wisdom He has manifested in the structure of creation that I behold is to me incomprehensible, but because even this manifestation, great as it is, is probably but a small display of that immensity of power and wisdom by which millions of other worlds, to me invisible by their distance, were created and continue to exist. (72; pt. 1)

Freneau, like Paine, finds the inference of a supreme being plausible based on the evidence of the "Great Frame" (17) he beholds, yet the power "whose mansion is unbounding space" (28) resists any further discovery.

Epistemological limitations, however, no longer translate into the type of human helplessness or indifference expressed in Freneau's pessimistic works. The aggressive use of intellect was introduced in "The Pictures of Columbus" as a means of achieving a greater understanding of the world and later emphasized in the Rising Empire poems as a vital component of building a healthy commercial society. After 1800 it becomes necessary both to the improvement of human virtue and to the strengthening of the

bond of reason between humanity and the deity. "Science Favourable to Virtue," from the 1809 collection, examines the paradox of humanity's high intellectual aspirations and limited capacities and concludes that the intellectual growth of the human mind is inexorably tied to its moral growth and stability. Freneau argues that we are uncertain of the world and our place in it and are thus "anxious to investigate/ All knowledge through creation" (Poems (1809) I, 261-62, ll. 2-3). Human curiosity is so great, in fact, that it would attempt to discover the very source of wisdom to understand the laws of nature. But this desire is essentially a "Vain wish" (9) to become equal with God, an impossibility for humans, for the aspiring mind, "though perched on eagles' wings" (11), still must struggle to understand even the surface of nature, what Freneau calls "the scum of things" (12). Any greater aspirations of the mind are doomed to frustration:

> Of things supreme she dreams or doats;
> Fluttering awhile, she soon descends,
> And all in disappointment ends.
>
> (14-16)

Still, Freneau finds a divine purpose behind humanity's exercise of reason:

> From efforts and attempts, like these,
> Virtue is gained by slow degrees;
> And science, which from truth she draws,

Stands firm to Reason and her cause.

(21-24)

The purpose of intellection is twofold; the exercise of reason through scientific inquiry enhances virtue and suppresses "brutal instinct" (27), which simultaneously fulfills the "philanthropic scheme" (32) of allowing humanity to at least approach the perfection of the deity and "honour Reason ere we die" (28). Just as Freneau metaphorically saw through the shallow romantic perceptions of nature to a more substantial reality in "A Moral Thought" almost thirty years before, he now argues that the same exercise of mind will result not in a depressing cosmic vision but in the discovery and growth of a natural goodness in humanity that may ultimately achieve a rational earthly millennium (Heiser 99).

"On the Powers of Human Understanding," also from the 1809 Poems (I, 264-65), focuses first on these same capabilities of reason, in particular on the virtues to be gained from the "moral powers" of the mind. These moral powers "lift us to the power who made/ Illume what seems to us all shade" (16-17). This illumination reprises the idea that reason helps us understand the appearances of the material world, but the assertion that it may also raise us toward the creator initiates the discussion of a cosmology that encompasses both God and afterlife. Freneau infers God and eternal existence from nature. His concepts of both are

necessarily vague because, once again, he cannot know either one empirically and instead hypothesizes their existence largely on the basis of observation of the material world.

The specifics of the cosmological view Freneau develops in this poem start with his assertion that the application of reason advances the "social plan" of humanity:

> Though for some better state designed,
> Is there not vigour in the mind
> To make a heaven of this-- (27-29)

The "better state" for which the mind is designed is an afterlife, but not one based on good works or belief in a divine embodiment of good. The godhead of this theological system is a purely rational one, the "Great Supreme," who, as "the vast self [from which] all power derives" (5) precedes humanity as both the source of and the model for its "faint image," the human mind. To reach this "better state" humans must progress toward the rational godhead through a continuing exercise of reason. Such a progression, however, includes not only rational pursuits in the material world but also literally dying into a supernal world that provides opportunities for discovery that far exceed those here:

> The power of death must come between
> And nature gives another scene
> More brilliant to admire. (40-42)

Upon entering this supernal world, the mind

"decomposed, or recombined" (43) may gain "a nearer rank with that first cause" (46), but get no farther. Humans will never reach a plane equal to that of God and, in fact, cannot be sure just how far this evolution of mind will take them, for the italicized <u>may</u> in the next to last stanza adds an ambiguous note to this afterlife. The last stanza extends the ambiguity, describing in non-anthropomorphic terms the final destination of reasoning humanity as a "mass of souls united.../ In orbs that heaven assigns" (53-54). Though the process will be a slow one, humanity may nonetheless, through the intellectual and moral progress of the mind, move toward a perfection that could reach its fruition in a rational afterlife.

Both "Science Favourable to Virtue" and "Reflections on the Power of Human Understanding" present abstract arguments for intellect as a means of approaching the deity. But, as I stated at the beginning of this chapter, many of Freneau's poems in the final stage of his career centered on practical problems and socially responsible advice. "The Blasts of November," from the 1809 <u>Poems</u>, successfully combines Freneau's pragmatic concerns and his abstract philosophizing by illustrating how the practical use of intellect both overcomes nature's violence and reflects the human mind's "god-like" qualities. The poem uses Fulton's steam engine as an example of the fruits of human intellect which here serve to combat the malignant side of nature.

Again water takes on nature's malevolent role, as Freneau begins with a ship's sinking in a severe storm on the Hudson:

> As from the shore she took her dangerous way
> Rude gloom'd the sky, and blustering was the day.
> With pain I saw the shivering sail depart,
> The blast, too powerful, mock'd the steersman's art
> In vain the helm by wary hands was held,
> No care protected when the storm assail'd.
> The darkening cloud, with maddening fury, pass'd,
> Struck at the sail, and bent the quivering mast,
> No more the barque her trembling charge could save,
> But dipp'd her pinions in the briny wave.
>
> (Poems (1809) II, 29-30, ll. 3-12)

While certainly expressing regret for the loss of life, the poem lacks the philosophical gloom of similar scenes Freneau depicted in the 1780's. For example, the passage recalls "The Hurricane," particularly in the barque's feeble resistance to the storm's fury and the steersman's impotency in combating it. But what Freneau presents here is not nihilistic despair but an almost reportorial detachment. Instead of depressed musings on humanity's fate in an alien environment, he describes a violent event as if he were posing a problem requiring a solution.

The second half of the poem retains this objectivity, using the tragedy to demonstrate the scientific superiority

of the steam engine:

> Let Fulton's art, unrivall'd art, prevail,
> Nor trust existence to the treacherous sail.
> Since he applies the powers that nature gave,
> Disarms, and smooths the dark malignant wave,
> Prefer his plan to all the sail supplies:
> As he arranged, the waves may round you rise;
> Waste all their foam, and not one fear impart:
> The height, the beauty, and the pride of art.
>
> (23-31)

Freneau suggests a parallel between Fulton's use of reason to produce "unrivall'd art" and the work of the deity. Just as the deity created the universe out of chaos, Fulton, in disarming nature's violence, has created order out of disorder, so much so that Freneau calls the invention a "plan" that has "arranged" the world in a new way. The waves that once induced fear now "waste all their foam." Even the schedule of travel is altered, for "no tides delay" (35) a steamer. Finally, Fulton's machine is aesthetically compared to the deity's creation as the "height, the beauty, and the pride of art." Science's practical and philosophic consequences thus seem to go hand in hand. Nature is no longer an adversary to fear but a problem to solve so long as humans use "the powers that nature gave."

Freneau also asserts that such powers be used for spiritual reasoning as well as scientific reasoning. Poems

such as "Belief and Unbelief" and "The Religion of Nature," both from the 1815 collection, reject Christianity and other supernatural religions because they are based on myth and fancy, not on rational investigation of the empirical world. "Belief and Unbelief" takes issue with belief based on the type of second-hand revelation that is built into many creeds instead of on the revelation of empirical evidence. Like Paine, who insisted a revelation was valid only for the person to whom it was made, Freneau finds religions based on supernatural myth, particularly those rejected or disclaimed by reason or truth, the cause of mayhem in society. Belief by itself does not lend weight to a religious opinion:

> On mere belief no merit rests,
> As unbelief no guilt attests:
> Belief, if not absurd and blind,
> Is but conviction of the mind,
>
> Nor can conviction bind the heart
> Till evidence has done its part;
> And, when that evidence is clear,
> Belief is just, and truth is near.
>
> (Poems (1815) I, 119-21, ll. 9-16)

Without empirical evidence to support belief in a philosophy or religion, no one is "fairly bound/ To yield assent, or homage pay" (18-19); to demand anything else would be an

attempt "to extort belief" (21). Unbelief is justified until evidence "of strongest kind" (36) clears the mind's way to assent. "Belief and Unbelief" is first an argument against institutional creeds that demand conformity to a religious point of view, but it also advocates the unfettered use of human reason to explore the empirical universe and come to cosmological conclusions about it.

Freneau reiterates the point in "On the Religion of Nature," contending that the acrimony created by religious differences would have been avoided if humanity had sought religion in nature. "Sophists would cease their vain disputes" and "nations would know/ All that can make their heaven below" (Poems (1815) I, 105-06, ll. 16-18), because nature offers the same empirical proof of divine perfection to all. But more important, the ability to discover this perfection and the intimations of a supreme being that go with it is "born within ourselves" (7), a component of human reason "bestow'd" (6) at creation. Freneau's belief in the human potential to discover religion through reason, though it is deistic rather than Christian, recalls John Witherspoon's Common Sense tenet that religion is an inherent disposition in all humans that can be substantiated empirically (Vitzthum 173). Witherspoon had insisted that immediate experience and humanity's inherent sense of morality could together lead to material and spiritual improvements in society. Over forty years later, Freneau's

belief in empirical experience and human reason as the tools of social development and religious discovery echoed Witherspoon's thought.

Much of this discussion has centered on Freneau's sense of epistemological limitation and the use of reason to overcome it, but the best gauge of Freneau's philosophic viewpoint after 1800 is the harmony the poet now sees beyond the appearances of a discordant universe. What empirical observation reveals to Freneau is a greater sense of nature's order, and it is from this order that humanity can infer the perfection of both the deity and its design. Two works sharing similar settings use the image of a volcano to explain the symbiotic relationship between nature's violence and its resulting ability to sustain life. "Stanzas Written at Oratava, in view of the Peak of Teneriffe, 1804," first appearing in the Charleston City Gazette in 1804 before its republication in 1809, traces the island's evolution from lava-spewing volcano to pastoral island. Originally "Indebted to volcanic fire" (8), Teneriffe was first an image of nature's awful power:

For torrents from the mountain came;
What molten floods were seen to glow!
Expanded sheets of vivid flame,
To inundate the world below!
These, older than the historian's page

Once bellow'd forth vext nature's rage.

(13-18)

But the ridges once barren from the lava that ran down their sides now are filled with groves and pastures; nature no longer destroys but nurtures:

Upon the verdant, scented lawn
The flowers a thousand sweets disperse,
And pictures, there, by nature drawn,
Inspire some island poet's verse,
While streams through every valley rove
To bless the garden, grace the grove.

(25-30)

The imagery takes on characteristics of some of Freneau's earlier pastorals, but here nothing is undercut in the sinister fashion of "The Beauties of Santa Cruz." The savagery and beauty of nature, its inexplicable duality in the 1780's, are reconciled as part of nature's design. Freneau even admits that the eruptions that once dominated the island could rise again and destroy it, but there is no lamentation or stoic resignation. Instead there is a realization of the interplay between creation and destruction that will go on forever (Vitzthum 170).

The same volcanic image reappears in 1815's "On the Peak of Pico; One of the Azores, or Western Islands," where Freneau again explores the harmoniousness of nature. The ocean, in the form of rain clouds, fills Pico's volcanic

cone with water that cascades down in streams along the mountain's side. As the waters reach the valleys surrounding the mountain, they in turn give the fields, groves, and vineyards their verdant color. Because this simple yet eternal cycle of sustenance represents nature at its most self-sufficient and benign, Freneau calls Pico "a second polar star" (Poems (1815) I, 167-68, l. 24) that can be considered a guide to nature's perfection.

Freneau's faith in natural harmony also allows him to recast his now familiar symbol of realism and discord, the sea, turning it into a paradigm of natural benevolence even as it displays its moments of disorder. "Lines Written at Sea," from the 1809 collection, presents a different perspective of nature compared to the poems of the 1780's. Whereas the sea represents volatility and treachery in "The Hurricane," "The Departure," or "Captain Jones' Invitation," here it becomes the expression of Freneau's delight with creation:

> No pleasure on earth can afford such delights,
> As the heavenly view of these tropical nights,
> The glow of the stars, and the breeze of the sea,
> Are heaven--if heaven on ocean can be.--
>
> (Poems (1809) II, 34-35, ll. 1-4)

When "the sun in the water [travels] to bed...to recline at his ease" (6-7), one is reminded of a similar dramatic situation in "The Hurricane" that symbolizes both the

failure of Christian salvation and the ultimate destruction of the material world. The image here, however, suggests that the harshness of nature and the cruelty of humanity have been softened by Freneau's philosophic serenity. As the speaker later muses over the absence of an "an insular spot/Where quarrels, murder, and malice are not" (9-10), he no longer laments over the loss of a "favorite isle" as he did almost forty years earlier in "The American Village," but simply utters an even-tempered "What pity" (9).

But his mention of such a pastoral idyll suggests that his awareness of the world's discord has not disappeared, and the closing stanza casually admits to the appearance of randomness:

> Like an artist that's busy in melting his lead,
> At random it falls, and is carelessly spread,
> So Nature, though wisely the globe she has planned,
> Left the surface to chance--to be sea, or be land.
>
> (21-24)

It is the "surface" that has been left to chance, leaving the wise plan of nature difficult to discern, the resulting optimism about what lies under the surface having replaced the anger and frustration of the 1780's. What the tone of this poem suggests is Freneau's confidence in a level of control beyond human comprehension. Nature's shortcomings are framed in language that minimizes, almost trivializes, whatever disharmony exists.

But in "The Brook of the Valley" disharmony is not trivialized but rather celebrated as part of the regenerative cycle of nature that is both benign and violent. The disruptive, if not destructive, aspect of nature is once again indicative of Freneau's acceptance of nature's duality as a necessary part of the divine plan. It initially seems that the valley through which this brook runs will be forever blessed by an eternally passive stream always at rest, but:

> ...if always thus at rest;
> This would not be for the best
> In one summer you would die,
> And leave the valley parch'd and dry.
>
> (Poems (1815), 81-83, ll. 9-12)

Stagnation would harm both the stream and the valley surrounding it, for the cycles of nature, as in "The Peak of Teneriffe" and "The Peak of Pico," are needed to sustain life. Thus the speaker cites the cycle of evaporation, condensation, and precipitation that maintains not only this stream but those of other plains and woods. The water's disappearance into vapor and reappearance as liquid is yet another example of the cycles of Lucretian materialism, only now Freneau uses it not to suggest nihilism but to exemplify the role of nature's renewal. Such cycles, however, can be violent:

But, with all your quiet flow,
Do you not some quarrels know!
Lately, angry, how you ran!
All at war--and much like man.

When the shower of waters fell,
How you raged, and what a swell!
All your banks you overflow'd,
Scarcely knew your own abode! (33-40)

The flooding disrupts the valley, felling the speaker's willow, which in turn damages the underwood and bushes surrounding it. But such flooding, despite its destructiveness, is beneficial to the valley, for it is the stream's cycle of ebb and flood that sustains the valley's foliage.

The end of the poem turns from the ever-changing stream to ever-changing humanity. Though the stream's occasional violence is necessary to the valley's well-being and therefore illustrative of an ordered universe, the alternating serenity and agitation of humans is not. Outside of reason's order, their periodic urge to make war is an example of the "grovelling passions" and "brutal instinct" that the rigorous application of reason would suppress. Hence the final two stanzas, summarizing the rising and receding violence of nature and humanity, should be read not literally but ironically:

Emblem now of restless man;
What a sketch of nature's plan!
Now at peace, now at war,
Now you murmur, now you roar;

Muddy now, and limpid next,
Now with icy shackles vext--
What a likeness here we find!
What a picture of mankind! (49-56)

Griffith describes the human disorders of these stanzas as the necessary dissonance of humanity's rational and imaginative faculties (217), but it seems a positive interpretation is unlikely. These are the disorders of unruliness created by humans who will not apply the rule of reason to their existence and thereby gain the understanding reason provides.

But whatever chaos humans create, the order of nature is inviolate and thereby symbolizes the perfection of the deity. Nowhere after 1800 is Freneau's teleological conclusion more clearly summarized than in "On the Uniformity and Perfection of Nature" from the 1815 Poems.[2] Its subject is the unerring perfection of the divine plan, which is necessarily good despite the vicissitudes of everyday life:

On one fix'd point all nature moves,
Nor deviates from the track she loves;

Her system, drawn from reason's source,
She scorns to change her wonted course.
(Poems (1815) I, 94-95, ll. 1-4)

The unwavering constancy of nature is stressed in this stanza, each line suggesting an immutability that emanates from the deity behind it. The perfection of nature is a reflection of the creator's perfection; any deviation in nature would imply the imperfection of the whole:

Could she descend from that great plan
To work unusual things for man,
To suit the insect of an hour--
This would betray a want of power,

Unsettled in its first design
And erring, when it did combine
The parts that form the vast machine,
The figures sketch'd on nature's scene.
(5-12)

This passage tells much about Freneau's system. Because change implies imperfection, to "work unusual things," an expression of divine intervention, becomes impossible and thereby removes the deity from active participation in the events of the world, as adjustments would indicate an "unsettled" or "erring" design. Furthermore, the reference to humanity as "the insect of the hour" sets human potential in the context of a universal

design and reinforces our sense of the epistemological limitations of humanity. Simultaneously, the reference recalls the penultimate line of "The Wild Honey Suckle" ("The space between is but an hour"), an expression of a brevity and obscurity in human existence that is now seen more positively:

> Perfections of the great first cause
> Submit to no contracted laws,
> But all-sufficient, all supreme,
> Include no trivial views in them.
>
> Who looks through nature with an eye
> That would the scheme of heaven descry,
> Observes her constant, still the same,
> In all her laws, through all her frame.
>
> (13-20)

In its general evolution, in its vastness that lies beyond human perception, nature is indeed constant throughout the universe and hence consists of no "contracted laws" that could possibly be broken or ignored. Thus whatever appears to be chaos, even in those dark visions of the 1780's, is part of a larger order, the perfection of which Freneau celebrates in language echoing the conclusion of the first epistle of Pope's Essay on Man almost a century before:

> No imperfection can be found
> In all that is, above, around,--

All, nature made, in reason's sight
Is order all, and <u>all is right</u>. (21-24)

As Freneau came to the end of his literary career, he achieved a philosophic calm that seemed beyond his reach thirty years before. Though the transformation began as early as 1788, it was after 1800 that he succeeded in reconciling the contradictions in nature and human society and filling the spiritual void that such contradictions implied. His solution enveloped the entire cosmos, including both its creative and destructive aspects, in an eighteenth-century deistic creed that explained inconsistencies as part of a divine plan set in motion by a distant supreme being. The so-called illusions of nature that spawned the poet's nihilistic fears in the 1780's turned out to be, for him, a small part of a greater design. Humanity's only hope of understanding the design and the maker lay in the kind of rational empiricism best embodied in scientific enquiry. As a corollary, science not only gave humanity the opportunity to find evidence of a deity but also served as the means of civilizing human society.

In this regard Freneau reflected a general attitude in the young American republic that saw technological progress as evidence of a celestial reason to which humanity was gradually gaining access through natural revelation (Marx 160-185). But Freneau's private search for order was more obsessive, deliberate, and ultimately satisfying than all

but a handful of his readers have suspected.

Endnotes

[1] "Reflections on the General Debased Condition of Mankind" appeared in the Time-Piece on September 25, 1797. "On False Systems of Government, and the generally debased condition of Mankind" appeared in the Charleston City Gazette on December 24, 1800.

[2] Roy Harvey Pearce in The Continuity of American Poetry (201) considers this poem as much a political as a philosophical solution for Freneau. He calls it a simplistic view of the great chain of being which allows him to harmonize the particulars of natural description with a faith in reason and intelligibility. This view, he says, possesses strong republican overtones. One can argue that humanity is capable of understanding the order of things; therefore humanity is reasonable; therefore humanity deserves equal rights; therefore humanity must help advance the cause of a democratic society.

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